# CONSEQUENCES OF THE TOP-TWO PRIMARY REFORM

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## ABSTRACT

Steven W. Sparks: Consequences of the top-two primary reform
(Under the direction of Pamela Conover)

This dissertation examines how the top-two primary reform reshapes conventional wisdoms about candidate and voter behavior in American politics. The top-two primary modifies the typical two-stage process by placing all candidates into a single blanket primary. The general election then consists of a runoff between the two candidates that receive the most votes, regardless of party. In this research program, I investigate how general election contests between two candidates of the same party affect campaign dynamics of competition and responsiveness. This project contributes to our understanding of how electoral institutions shape the choices that voters have on election day and the barriers that those candidates face for winning elections. In this dissertation, I find evidence that same-party general election contests affect the influence of campaign spending, how candidates position themselves when they run for office, and the methods and intensity with which they campaign.

In the first study, I investigate how the presence of a same-party opponent affects the influence of challenger campaign expenditures. I find that the top-two primary increases electoral competitiveness by enabling challengers in one-party contests to earn more than twice as many voters per dollar than those in two-party contests. In the second study, I investigate whether the top-two primary invokes ideological moderation by evaluating candidate campaign rhetoric. I analyze the content of 306 candidate campaign websites in California and Washington during the 2016 election cycle, finding evidence that those facing same-party opponents use more moderate, bipartisan, and vague rhetoric. In the third study, I conduct interviews with legislative candidates to understand how running in a one-party contest affects the methods and intensity with which candidates campaign. Interviews support the notion that those in one-party contests moderate their rhetoric, broaden their appeal, and employ voter contact strategies that are commensurate with a highly-competitive contest.

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the modern era, partisan elections in the United States are predominately two-stage processes in which candidates must compete in a party primary in the first stage. The winners of each party primary then move on to compete against one other in the general election. The top-two primary changes this process by placing all candidates, regardless of party affiliation, into a single primary in which any voter may choose any candidate. The first and second place finishers in that primary then proceed to a runoff in the general election, even if both candidates are from the same party. This system is now used in California, Louisiana, and Washington, which are collectively home to one sixth of all Americans.

The top-two primary was implemented by Washington in 2008 and by California in 2012. In both states, advocates hoped that the system would substantively reshape elections and representation in their respective states. In particular, reformers decried the tendency for traditional primaries to nominate polarized candidates that are unrepresentative of their constituencies (Nielson and Visalvanich 2016). At the state legislative level, only about 15 percent of contests nationwide are decided by a margin of 10 percentage points or fewer (Carsey et al. 2008). Since most districts provide a strong electoral advantage to one party, this results in circumstances where one extreme candidate is guaranteed victory by virtue of party labels alone. Advocates of the top-two primary argued that in safe districts, greater choice and competition may be produced when two candidates of the same party advance to the general election. Furthermore, if safe districts offer voters the choice between one extreme and one moderate candidate of the same party in the general election, those safe districts may choose the candidate that best approximates the district median. Over time, reformers hoped that this trend would allow for more accurate representation of mass public, reduce polarization in government, and mitigate policy gridlock (Pildes 2011).

In this dissertation, I investigate the consquences of this reform for electoral competition and representation. As other states consider implementing the top-two primary,

this research program seeks to understand how same-party general election contests reshape conventional wisdoms about candidate and voter behavior in American politics. More specifically, I use the context of state legislative elections to evaluate how same-party contests affect the influence of campaign spending, the positions that candidates take when they run for office, and the methods and intensity with which they campaign. In short, I find that the top-two primary produces several important consequences for representative democracy.

**History and context**

A version of the top-two primary has been used in Louisiana for more than 40 years. In the 1970s, Louisiana was dominated politically by the Democratic party. Governor Edwin Edwards, a Democrat, sought to change the traditional primary process because it was clear that incumbent Democrats (in particular, Governor Edwards) would face their toughest electoral challenges from within their own party. The top-two runoff format was designed to guarantee that Governor Edwards would not be eliminated in the first round of voting. The new top-two primary system was first used in 1975, a year in which he handily won re-election (Mooney 2002). Louisiana's version of the top-two primary differs from more recent adaptations because any candidate that earns more than 50% in the primary will be elected into office without the need for a runoff election. With this rule, very few contests proceed to a runoff, including fewer than 5% of legislative elections. When runoffs do occur, they are held in late November or early December. Thus, they are characterized by especially low voter turnout. Louisiana has made minor changes to their top-two primary system over the years. For instance, Louisiana did not use the top-two format for congressional elections in 2008 or 2010, and the timing of the primary and runoff has varied.

Decades later, reformers in some states look to the top-two primary as a possible antidote to polarization and gridlock. In 2004, the Washington State Grange, a nonpartisan fraternal organization, sponsored an effort to enact the top-two primary via ballot initiative I-872. The initiative's principal goals were to create more competitive elections, elect leaders that more accurately represent the mass public, and shift influence of candidate selection away

from party organizations that favor ideologically-extreme candidates[1]. Voters approved I-872 with 60% of the vote (Galloway 2008) with resistance from major and minor parties alike. The two major parties opposed the reform because same-party contests would prevent them from contesting many seats, while minor parties expected that they would be shut out from virtually all contests in the general election. A challenge found its way to the United States Supreme Court in *Washington State Grange v. Washington State Republican Party*, but I-872 was upheld as constitutional and the system was implemented in 2008.

In California, Republican State Senator Abel Moldonado, a moderate, is largely credited for his state's adoption of the top-two primary. For more than a decade leading up to 2009, California's legislature consistently ranked as the most polarized in the nation (Shor and McCarty 2011). California's Proposition 13 also requires a two-thirds majority to pass revenue increases. In 2009, these two factors led to a budget impasse in which Democrats faced resistance to revenue increases during the Great Recession. Democrats needed a single Republican vote to reach the supermajority requirement in the state senate. Senator Moldenado offered his support, and in return, asked Democrats to place a referendum on the ballot that would offer voters the option of implementing the top-two primary. Moldenado saw the reform as an opportunity to ease polarization and limit future stalemates by creating an environment more conducive to consensus and bipartisanship. If moderates could more easily survive the polarized primary process and get elected to the legislature, he reasoned, then Democrats and Republicans might be better-able to work together. The referendum was approved with 54% of the vote (Caen 2015).

More recently, interest in the top-two primary has diffused to other states. Some have attempted to implement the top-two primary through direct democracy pathways. In Oregon, Measure 90 made it onto the ballot in November 2014, but was rejected by a margin of nearly 40 percentage points (Mapes 2014). In Arizona, advocates pushed to place an initiative on the 2012 and 2016 ballots, albeit unsuccessfully both times (Duda 2016). In South Dakota, Amendment V was a version of the top-two primary that would have used nonpartisan

[1]Washington initiative organizer's website: http://blanketprimary.inwa.net/faq.php

elections, but was rejected by voters in November 2016. Reformers made a second attempt to bring the top-two primary to South Dakota in 2018, this time with a partisan election format, but the effort failed to gather enough signatures to qualify for the ballot.[2]

Elsewhere, lawmakers have attempted to use legislative pathways to implement the top-two primary. Bills have been introduced in the Arkansas, Illinois, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oregon, and Virginia state legislatures over the past several years. In Congress, a bill that would impose the top-two primary for all congressional candidates was introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives.[3] Across a wide range of efforts to enact the system through both legislative and direct democracy pathways, what remains constant are advocates' goals of improving the balance of representation, mitigating the effects of polarization, and making elections more competitive.

**Overview of dissertation**

In the proceeding chapters, three studies investigate how the top-two primary, and the presence of same-party general election contests, affect the competitive electoral environment. These three studies vary in their methods and specific focus, but are bound by a common theme of investigating the implications of the electoral reform for voter and candidate behavior. As reformers pursue adoption of the top-two primary in other states, this research lends insight into the practical implications of those efforts.

In Chapter 2, I find evidence that the presence of a same-party opponent affects the influence of challenger campaign spending in state legislative contests. In two-party contests, voters receive information from party labels and from candidate advertising, which is facilitated by campaign spending. Combined, this information helps voters make decisions on election day. In the absence of differentiating party labels in one-party contests, the information provided by candidate spending should matter more. Specifically, I argue that expenditures made by challengers facing same-party opponents should be more effective for increasing vote share than those facing opposite-party opponents. This chapter examines

[2]South Dakota Secretary of State: https://sdsos.gov

[3]http://billtrack50.com

legislative elections in California and Washington, finding that challenger spending in one-party contests increases vote share at more than twice the pace per dollar spent when compared with challengers in two-party contests. Ultimately, results find evidence that the top-two primary changes the competitive electoral environment by helping challengers facing a same-party incumbent to overcome the inherent resource advantages that incumbents enjoy.

In Chapter 3, I investigate the consequences of the top-two primary for candidate rhetoric in one-party contests. Downsian theory (1957) has long informed how scholars think about American two-stage elections, with the conventional wisdom that candidates diverge for the primary and converge in the general election. Recent research, however, finds that candidates do not adhere to Downsian theory in down-ballot contests. Instead, candidates in U.S. House (Burden 2004) and state legislative (Frendreis et al. 2003) contests remain in their more extreme primary ideological space for the general election. As I will I argue, candidates facing a same-party opponent in the general election should face incentives to self-moderate their positions towards the district median when they can no longer rely on party-based voting to win. In this chapter, I analyze the content of legislative candidates' campaign websites to find several important differences in the types of rhetoric used by candidates in one-party and two-party contests. First, candidates in one-party contests use more moderate, bipartisan, and vague messaging when compared to those in two-party contests. Furthermore, the party of one's opponent affects the endorsements that candidates list, the issues that they talk about, and the ways that they talk about those issues.

In Chapter 4, I build upon these findings for candidate behavior by conducting in-depth interviews with state legislative candidates during the 2016 election cycle. In these interviews, I speak with candidates running in districts that feature a partisan balance that strongly favors one party or the other. Twenty candidates were interviewed, including 10 that faced an opposite-party opponent and 10 that faced a same-party opponent. Two key findings emerge from these interviews. First, candidates intentionally moderate and broaden their appeal in one-party contests. Second, candidates in one-party contests adopt campaign strategies that are commensurate with a highly-competitive contest.

## CHAPTER 2: CAMPAIGN SPENDING AND ELECTORAL COMPETITION [4]

Political scientists have long sought to understand the many ways in which money shapes electoral outcomes, with much of that attention directed towards better understanding the connection between campaign spending and vote share. Those who have investigated this question at the state legislative level, in particular, have long established that when challengers spend more, they typically will earn a greater percentage of the overall vote in both state legislative primaries (Breaux and Gierzynski 1991; Welch 1976) and general election contests (Gierzynski and Breaux 1991). Others have found that these effects are mediated by several factors. For example, the presence of strong gubernatorial coattails may dampen the effects of spending in state legislative elections (Hogan 2005), while the presence of stricter campaign finance regulations stimulate electoral competition by encouraging quality challenger emergence (Hamm and Hogan 2008). In this paper, I use the context of the top-two primary to broaden our understanding of how the effectiveness of campaign spending is conditioned by electoral institutions.

States with traditional primaries typically have a process through which the slate of candidates is narrowed to one candidate from each party, if such candidates have filed to run. The top-two primary system differs by placing all candidates for a given position into a single blanket primary. The two candidates with the most votes then proceed to a runoff general election, regardless of their respective party affiliations. This rule allows for contests in which two candidates of the same party may face each other in the general election. The top-two primary, implemented by Washington in 2008 and California in 2012,[5] provides a venue in which we can further develop our understanding of how electoral rules shape outcomes.

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[4]This chapter previously appeared as an article in *Electoral Studies*. The original citation is as follows: Sparks, Steven. 2018. "Campaign spending and the top-two primary: How challengers earn more votes per dollar in one-party contests." *Electoral Studies* 54: 56-65.

[5]Louisiana's system differs from those of California and Washington because if one candidate receives more than 50% of the total vote in the primary, that candidate is declared the winner and no runoff election is held.

Investigating the intended and unintended consequences also offers a practical importance as reformers in other states consider adopting the system.

State legislative elections are typically low-information contests that lack the media attention enjoyed by candidates at the top of the ticket (Kaplan, Goldstein, and Hale 2003). In the absence of information about candidates' positions, voters often rely on party labels as heuristics to guide preference-consistent choices (see Conover and Feldman 1982; McDermott 1997). When two candidates of the same party face each other in the general election, however, party labels no longer offer a meaningful signal to facilitate voting decisions. In this paper, I investigate whether the dual absence of media attention and differentiating party cues will raise the effectiveness of challenger campaign spending in state legislative elections. I expect that in one-party contests, challengers will receive a greater increase in vote share per dollar spent when compared with those in two-party contests. This expectation is driven by the importance of campaign spending for establishing name recognition and conveying information to voters, which ultimately earns candidates more votes on Election Day. The present study will test these expectations by analyzing elections data from state legislative contests in California and Washington.[6]

**The top-two primary and electoral behavior**

Recent diffusion of the top-two primary beyond Louisiana has inspired some scholarly attention towards investigating its effects. Many have sought to answer whether the top-two primary, as well as similar attempts to open up the primary process, fulfill reformers' goals of electing more moderate elected officials. Findings are mixed at best. One study finds that California's experiment with the open blanket primary in the late 1990s indeed produced more victories for moderates in legislative and congressional elections (Gerber 2002). However, an experiment studying the top-two primary find that voters participating in same-party legislative contests do not have the information necessary to make policy-based distinctions

[6]Some works in the campaign spending literature point out the possibility of reverse-causality, whereby popularity, viability, or strong poll performances encourage stronger fundraising, which in turn feeds back into increasing viability or popularity (see Adkins and Dowdle 2002). The cross-sectional nature of the present data complicate the untangling of this possibility. However, the principal theoretical argument remains that gaining information from some other source is more critical in the absence of differentiating party labels, and that each dollar spent towards the provision of information becomes more valuable in such scenarios.

between their choices, ultimately concluding that moderate candidates fare no better under the system (Ahler et al. 2016). Others find that no moderating effect is observed in the legislators elected under the top-two primary (Kousser et al. 2016) or in California's previous open blanket primary system in the late 1990s (McGhee et al. 2014).

Some have investigated how the top-two primary affects electoral competition and voting behavior more broadly. Many trends stand out in these early evaluations. First, analysis of California's legislative elections reveals that zero state legislative incumbents lost their re-election bids from 2002 to 2010, even following the 2000 redistricting (Olson and Ali 2015). However, when the top-two primary was first used in 2012, state legislative incumbents in California saw a spike in the number of challenges within their own party, with the majority of these challengers emerging in traditionally safe districts (Masket 2012). Ten legislative and congressional incumbents lost their seats in California that year, with six of them losing to same-party opponents. Nine out of the ten intraparty runoffs that year occurred in safe districts. Overall, California was rated as having the most competitive state legislative elections in the country in 2012 (Olson and Ali 2015). It is worth noting that this rise in competition also follows a redistricting cycle and the introduction of a new bipartisan redistricting commission (Grainger 2010). Thus, it is difficult to assess the degree to which increased competition can be attributed to either primary reform or redistricting.

Others have observed a rise in information-seeking among voters participating in state legislative elections in California. When two legislative candidates of the same party faced each other in the general election, leaving voters without a meaningful party cue to distinguish their options, Google searches about those candidates increased by 15% when compared to candidates in two-party contests. No such increase in information-seeking was observed during the first stage of the election (Sinclair and Wray 2015).

The present study seeks to complement and expand upon these findings to further investigate how the top-two primary shapes electoral competitiveness and voter behavior. If challengers are indeed able to earn more votes per dollar spent, such results would reveal one way in which the top-two primary fulfills reformers' hopes of increased electoral competitiveness.

**Voter knowledge in state legislative elections**

State legislative elections have long been recognized as low-information contests in which voters possess little or no information with which to make an informed decision on Election Day (Gierzynski and Breaux 1991; Jewell and Olson 1988). Surveys frequently corroborate this claim by revealing a lack of knowledge about state legislators and legislative elections among the majority of voters: a 2006 survey of Utah voters revealed that only 34% could name at least one of their legislators, a 2014 survey of Tennessee voters found that just 44% knew which party controlled their state legislature, and in 2007, only 25% of New Jersey voters were aware that their state legislative elections would be held just two weeks following the date of the survey (Squire and Moncrief 2015).

Despite the lack of voter knowledge regarding state legislators and legislative elections, most voters are quite adept at using party cues to make meaningful inferences about candidate policy preferences. This facilitates voters' ability to make preference-consistent vote choices (see Conover and Feldman 1982; McDermott 1997; Tversky and Kahneman 1974). Further, while the specific cause is subject to debate, there is broader consensus that the accuracy and ease with which voters are able to use party cues has improved in recent decades. Whether caused by party sorting (Levendusky 2009; Nivola and Brady 2006), ideological polarization (Abramowitz 2010; Bafumi and Shapiro 2009), or conflict extension (Layman and Carsey 2002), the contemporary party system now presents voters with clearly distinct images of the two major parties. It has thus become easier for inattentive voters to make reasonably accurate approximations of the candidates' policy preferences based on party labels alone.

Voter reliance on party labels to drive vote choice is most prominent in down-ballot contests, such as state legislative elections (Schaffner and Streb 2002). This behavior is illustrated by studies of primary elections, where voters must use some means beyond party identity to evaluate candidates. Voters are reasonably able to make policy-based distinctions between candidates of the same party in statewide primaries such as gubernatorial and U.S. Senate contests, however, most lack the information needed to do so in down-ballot primaries (Hirano et al. 2015). Further, voters claim that they indeed want to cast preference-consistent

votes in down-ballot primaries (Hirano et al. 2015) non-partisan contests (Sheldon and Lovrich 1983), and one-party contests (Ahler et al. 2016), but that the information necessary to do so was less readily available. When such information is provided through candidates' campaign expenditures, voters should be more likely to use that information when they cannot rely on party labels alone. The top-two primary provides a context in which to test this expectation.

**Campaign spending as a conduit for voter knowledge**

One factor contributing to the disparity in voter knowledge in up-ballot versus down-ballot elections is that candidates at the bottom of the ticket receive far less (if any) free media coverage. Anaylsis of the 2002 midterm election reveals that only three percent of campaign stories on local news broadcasts mentioned state legislative contests (Kaplan, Goldstein, and Hale 2003). Therefore, the burden of educating voters about state legislative contests is left to the candidates themselves, and candidate-funded communications are often the primary method through which voters learn about their campaigns (Gierzynski and Breaux 1991). The present research examines how the role of campaign spending as a means for candidates to make themselves known to voters, and therefore increase vote share, is conditioned by the presence of a one-party or two-party contest.

While it is common to hear political observers lament the role of money in politics and the state of the uninformed electorate, higher levels of campaign spending produce normatively desirable outcomes in low-information contests ranging from judicial elections to U.S. House contests. It is well-established that increased spending in campaigns for state and local offices directly establishes candidate name recognition (Abbe and Herrnson 2003; Krebs 1998). Jacobson (2004) similarly finds that increased campaign spending improves voters' ability to recall candidates' names and recognize them in photographs. Campaign spending also improves voter knowledge about candidate policy preferences and raises voter affect towards candidates (Coleman and Manna 2000; Hall and Bonneau 2008). Presumably, however, most candidates' goal is not to establish name recognition or convey policy information for its own sake, but rather because it will make them more likely to win. Indeed, name recognition and familiarity do raise voters' perceptions of candidate quality, which acts

as one such mechanism through which candidates increase their vote share (Kam and Zechmeister 2013, Kenny and McBurnett 1997; Krebs 1998). At the legislative level, there is evidence that campaign spending increases vote share in general elections (Gierzynski and Breaux 1991), but also in primaries (Breaux and Gierzynski 1991; Welch 1976), where voters tend to be better-informed than the broader electorate.

While these findings demonstrate the importance of challenger spending for electoral competition, the fundraising disparity between incumbents and challengers acts as one barrier to challenger success. Approximately 64% of state legislative races in the U.S. were contested in 2013-2014, but only 18% of contests were considered monetarily competitive.[7] In 2013-2014 the better-funded candidate in every legislative contest across 47 states spent an average of $128,477, ranging from approximately $5,000 in Vermont to more than $1,000,000 in California (Holden 2016). The lesser-funded candidate in each contest often fares much worse. Only 2% of legislative contests in Georgia are monetarily competitive, with 5 additional states falling in the single digits. Maine (56%) and Connecticut (51%) are the only states in which at least half of legislative races are monetarily competitive (Holden 2016). Both have public campaign financing systems for legislative candidates.

The importance of this monetary imbalance lies in what it empowers candidates to do with a stark resource advantage. In recent years, state legislative campaigns have undergone a process of "congressionalization," whereby the activities, outreach tactics, and paid media strategies of legislative candidates increasingly mirror those of congressional campaigns. It is now common for state legislative candidates to hire professional campaign consultants who help them to employ voter outreach strategies such as direct mail, radio, and increasingly, television ads. When challengers are able to fund such efforts, it increases electoral competition because these methods chip away at the imbalance of name recognition enjoyed by incumbents (Abbe and Herrnson 2003). While challengers often face a stark funding disadvantage, I argue that same-party contests in top-two primary states create a condition under which challengers can make more efficient use of the funds they have, thereby

[7]Here, a contest is "monetarily competitive" when the candidate with fewer funds has raised at least half as much as their opponent.

improving their prospects for success.

Fundraising is not the only barrier to challenger success in legislative elections. As crossover voting has steadily declined, it is also clear that the vast majority of self-proclaimed independents demonstrate voting behavior nearly identical to their partisan counterparts (Keith et al. 1992). Given this trend, the number of persuadable voters in down-ballot contests featuring one Democrat and one Republican is minimal under most circumstances. When this is the case, a challenger might spend as much as they like, but party labels put a ceiling on the number of votes they can earn, creating diminishing returns as spending increases. When both candidates are from the same party, voters must look to other information to drive vote choice. If spending produces higher name recognition and voter knowledge, challengers should observe greater returns on their spending in one-party contests when voters are neither reliant upon, nor bound by, party-based voting.

**Summary and expectations**

In one-party general election contests, voters lack the ability to use party labels to distinguish their options. Furthermore, down-ballot legislative candidates lack the media attention enjoyed by the top of the ticket. In the dual absence of both media attention and helpful party cues, the information provided by campaign spending should matter more. Thus, I expect that one-party contests enable challengers to earn more votes per dollar spent than challengers in two-party contests.

**Data and methods**

This analysis includes general election legislative contests in California and Washington beginning in the years in which each state implemented the top-two primary. Washington enacted the system in 2008, providing 5 election cycles of observations through 2016. California adopted the reform in 2012, providing 3 cycles of observations. During these periods, there were a total of 790 legislative seats up for election. The dependent variable is the percentage of the vote earned by the challenger in each general election legislative contest. For this reason, open-seat and uncontested races are not included. This leaves a total of 529 of the 790 contests in the analysis. Descriptive statistics provide a breakdown of the one and two-party contests for each year and state in Table 1. Election results data were obtained from

the websites of the California[8] and Washington[9] Secretaries of State to code for challenger vote share. Observations from Louisiana's top-two primary are excluded from this analysis.[10]

***Table 1:*** **Descriptive statistics of contests included in analysis**

| State | Year | 1-Party* | | 2-Party | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| CA | 2012 | 4 | (8.2%) | 45 | 49 |
| CA | 2014 | 6 | (10.2%) | 53 | 59 |
| CA | 2016 | 9 | (13.4%) | 58 | 67 |
| WA | 2008 | 5 | (6.3%) | 75 | 80 |
| WA | 2010 | 7 | (9.6%) | 66 | 73 |
| WA | 2012 | 8 | (12.5%) | 56 | 64 |
| WA | 2014 | 7 | (9.5%) | 67 | 74 |
| WA | 2016 | 4 | (6.3%) | 59 | 63 |
| **Total** | | 50 | (9.5%) | 479 | 529 |

*Parentheses indicate % of total cases that are single-party contests

The natural logarithm of the total campaign expenditures for each challenger and each incumbent are included as independent variables for each contest. This transformation follows previous work (Gerber 1998), with the expectation that additional spending should add positive returns for vote share at all levels of spending, but that the amount of that return per dollar should decrease as spending increases. Spending data are obtained from the Washington Public Disclosure Commission[11] and the Cal-Access[12] website of the California Secretary of State's Office. Due to the logarithmic transformation, $1 is added to the spending totals of all candidates who made no expenditures. Descriptive statistics of expenditure totals

[8]http://sos.ca.gov/

[9]http://sos.wa.gov/

[10]Louisiana's top-two primary system differs from its counterparts in that contests only proceed to a runoff if no candidate earns more than 50% of the vote. If there is a majority winner in the primary, there is no second stage election. During the two cycles in which campaign expenditure data are electronically available for Louisiana, 2011 and 2015, only 12 of 288 contests proceeded to a runoff election featuring an incumbent and a challenger. Furthermore, runoff elections in Louisiana typically occur in either late November or early December of odd years, and thus, are marked by extremely low voter turnout. For these reasons, Louisiana contests are excluded from this analysis.

[11]http://www.pdc.wa.gov

[12]http://cal-access.ss.ca.gov

***Table 2:*** **Descriptive statistics of spending and vote share data**

| Variable | Min. | 1Q | Med. | Mean | 3Q | Max. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Challenger Spending** | | | | | | |
| California | 0 | 0 | 6.4 | 173.5 | 49.3 | 3379.7 |
| 1-Party Contests | 0 | 0 | 13.7 | 173.3 | 251.3 | 977.9 |
| 2-Party Contests | 0 | 0 | 6.3 | 173.5 | 47.8 | 3379.7 |
| Washington | 0 | 3.2 | 14.0 | 60.2 | 65.7 | 579.1 |
| 1-Party Contests | 0 | 1.4 | 13.4 | 45.8 | 61.1 | 345.1 |
| 2-Party Contests | 0 | 2.4 | 14.1 | 61.6 | 64.8 | 579.1 |
| *Incumbent Spending** | | | | | | |
| California | 93.6 | 303.1 | 418.0 | 603.6 | 643.0 | 3631.0 |
| 1-Party Contests | 93.6 | 218.8 | 366.8 | 629.7 | 894.4 | 2033.0 |
| 2-Party Contests | 122.6 | 306.4.0 | 425.0 | 600.6 | 631.2 | 3631.0 |
| Washington | 0.3 | 70.2 | 105.3 | 141.5 | 173.6 | 985.9 |
| 1-Party Contests | 0.8 | 77.4 | 101.9 | 117.8 | 132.5 | 486.1 |
| 2-Party Contests | 0.3 | 70.1 | 105.5 | 143.9 | 181.9 | 985.9 |
| *Challenger Vote Share (%)* | | | | | | |
| California | 13.3 | 30.8 | 36.2 | 35.9 | 41.1 | 60.2 |
| Washington | 11.5 | 35.4 | 40.3 | 38.9 | 44.6 | 60.3 |

*Expenditure totals are presented in thousands of dollars.

are presented in Table 2.[13]

I also include a dummy variable to indicate whether each contest features two candidates of the same party (one-party contest = 1). The theoretical argument predicts an interactive effect whereby increasing challenger spending generates more vote share per dollar in one-party contests, so I have included two interaction terms: one between the indicator variable for one-party contest and challenger expenditures and a second between one-party contest and incumbent campaign expenditures.

As Gierzynski and Breaux (1991) note, the incumbent's win margin in the previous election is an important predictor for both candidates' ability to solicit campaign contributions, and ultimately, for predicting vote share in election results. Further, past election results are a measure used by state campaign committees when allocating party resources (Gierzynski and Jewell 1989). I follow Gierzynsky and Breaux's (1991) formula to account for the expected competition in each contest by coding for the incumbent's win

[13]Given the dispersion of spending totals in Table 2, I assess the degree to which this study's findings may be sensitive to influential cases. More details are available in the results section in footnote 20.

margin in their previous contest.[14]

I also include a measure that indicates whether the challenger has previously held elected office, following Jacobson's (1989) classification of a quality challenger. Challengers with prior elected experience may be more effective candidates due to established donor and volunteer networks, increased name recognition, or because they have established campaign strategies that were successful in previous elections. Jacobson (1989) and others find that candidates that have previously held elective office receive a larger share of the vote and are much more likely to win than their counterparts who have not held elected office. Challengers with prior elected experience may also be more likely to emerge when the incumbent is especially vulnerable. This measure is added to account for any systematic differences in challenger performance that are related to these considerations.

The ideological makeup of each district's electorate is another important predictor for vote share. I account for district preferences by coding for each district's ideology score, as developed by Tausonovitch and Warshaw in the American Ideology Project.[15] They provide scores for every legislative district for both 2000 and 2010 district boundaries. Contests prior to 2012 are coded with 2000 district scores and contests beginning in 2012 are coded with 2010 scores. However, these scores are produced on a scale centered around 0, with negative scores indicating that a district is more liberal and positive scores indicating that a district is more conservative. I adjust the directional signs of these scores so that they indicate the strength of the challenger's party, with positive scores indicating greater challenger party strength and negative scores indicating that the challenger's party is weaker. Put simply, I reverse the sign of the district ideology measure for all contests in which the challenger is a Democrat. To illustrate, a Republican challenger in a conservative district will have a positive score and a Republican challenger in a liberal district will have a negative score. District ideology should have a weaker effect for challenger vote share when both candidates are from

[14]The win margin formula is calculated such that the coded number gets larger as competitiveness increases: previous margin = 50 - absolute value (previous vote - 50). A score of 0 indicates the lowest leves of competitiveness, while a score of 50 indicates the highest level of competitivesness.

[15]http://www.americanideologyproject.com

the same party, so an interaction term is included between this variable and one-party contest.

Finally, I code each contest with a dummy variable for the challenger's party (Democrat = 1), each election year (2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2016) and state (CA and WA), with Washington and 2016 excluded to avoid perfect multicollinearity. Further descriptive statistics of each independent variable are broken down by contest type and presented in Table 13 in Appendix 2.C.

Previous work on campaign spending using ordinary least squares regression finds that incumbents will earn the highest percentage of the vote when they spend the least, while challengers will see their vote share rise with increased spending (for examples, see Cassie and Breaux 1998; Gierzynski and Breaux 1991). Such predictions appear logically inconsistent, as this suggests that incumbents facing a strong, well-funded challenger will be most likely to win if they spend no money at all. However, as we know, these findings make more sense when we account for the fact that safe incumbents need not spend great sums of money to win handily, while those facing electoral trouble may spend much more and earn a much smaller margin of the overall vote. Many have noted that accurately predicting the effects of incumbent campaign expenditures for incumbent vote share is difficult because it is endogenously shaped by expectations of success (see Jacobson 1980; Green and Krasno 1988). As Jacobson (2006) notes, the use of ordinary least squares regression in such studies is found to bias estimates upward for challenger spending and bias estimates downward for incumbent spending.[16] The present study focuses on how challenger spending in one-party contests compares with challenger spending in two-party contests, not on comparisons between challenger and incumbent spending. Thus, the degree of bias, if any, will be the same across the two contexts, unlike comparisons between incumbent and challenger spending. Therefore, concerns about bias do not apply and the use of OLS is appropriate in this context.

[16]Many have used two-stage least squares regression to model expectations of candidate spending using an exogenous instrumental variable. For example, Gerber (1998) uses 2SLS to effectively distinguish the influence of challenger and incumbent spending. However, as Jacobson (2006) explains, many efforts for specification of the instrumental variable have produced mixed results, challenging the efficacy of this approach. Jacobson points out that some have used 2SLS to find results identical to those who have used OLS (Jacobson 1980, 1985), while others have found that incumbent spending is just as effective as challenger spending (Green and Krasno 1988; Grier 1991; Ansolabehere and Snyder 1996). In sum, the breadth of studies using 2SLS indicate disparate and inconclusive findings (Jacobson 2006).

In sum, the theoretical argument motivates the following model using ordinary least squares regression:

$$y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 (X_1 * X_3) + \beta_5 (X_2 * X_3) + \beta_6 X_4 + \beta_7 X_5 + \beta_8 (X_5 * X_3) + \beta_9 X_6 + \beta_{10} X_7 + \beta_{11} X_8 + \beta_{12} X_9 + \beta_{13} X_{10} + \beta_{14} X_{11} + \beta_{15} X_{12} + \epsilon_i$$

where
$y_i$ = Challenger Vote Share
$X_1$ = Natural Log of Challenger Spending
$X_2$ = Natural Log of Incumbent Spending
$X_3$ = One Party Contest
$X_4$ = Incumbent Previous Win Margin
$X_5$ = District Ideology
$X_6$ = Challenger Party (1 = Democrat)
$X_7$ = Quality Challenger (1 = Yes)
$X_8$ = 2008
$X_9$ = 2010
$X_{10}$ = 2012
$X_{11}$ = 2014
$X_{12}$ = California

**Results**

Model estimates are presented in Table 3. I expected that increasing challenger campaign spending would generate greater vote share per dollar spent in one-party contests than in two party contests. Findings provide support for this prediction, with the interaction term between log challenger spending and 1-party contest positive and significant at the 0.05 level. Challengers in one-party contests, on average, earn more than twice as many votes per unit increase in spending than challengers in two-party contests. Interpreting the coefficients of the log transformed variables, each 100% increase in challenger spending translates to an average .41 percentage point increase in challenger vote share in two-party contests.[17] Meanwhile, a 100% increase in challenger spending produces an average .89 percentage point

[17]This interpretation of the coefficient follows Gujarati (2003, p. 183) in which the coefficient for a log-transformed independent variable in OLS regression is interpreted as a 1% change in $X$ corresponding with a $\beta$/100 change in $Y$.

increase for challenger vote share in one-party contests.[18]. In practical terms, suppose Challenger A is running in a one-party contest and Challenger B is running in a two-party contest. Now, suppose each candidate spends a total of $13,000, which is roughly the median level of expenditures across contest type. All else equal, if each candidate doubled their expenditures from $13,000 to $26,000, Candidate A could expect to increase her vote share by .89 percentage points while Candidate B could expect to incease her vote share by .41 percentage points. Doubling expenditures again to $52,000 would earn Candidate A yet another .89 percentage points and earn Candidate B an additional .41 percentage points.[19]

Given the dispersion of the data for spending totals, I estimated the effect of influential cases for these results using Cook's Distance. With all influential cases removed, challengers still earn more than twice as many votes per dollar spent.[20]

I also investigate whether characteristics unique to districts where one-party contests occur are driving the results through selection bias. For this test, I re-run the analysis by only including observations from districts that saw at least one one-party contest and at least one two-party contest occur during the included years. With all other observations excluded, this sample includes 38 of the 50 one-party contests and 86 two-party contests, across 25 districts. The interaction term between challenger spending and one-party contest is significant at the

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[18]Here, the coefficient for challenger spending in one-party contests is calculated, using the model outlined on page 11, as $\beta_1 + \beta_4 X_3$ = 0.41+0.48(1) = 0.89.

[19]To investigate possible effects of multicollinearity, I perform the following checks. First, I report bivariate correlation coefficients among the independent variables in a correlation matrix, found in Appendix 2.A. A possible concern is that challenger and incumbent spending might be highly correlated because closely-contested contests and those in expensive media markets are likely to see increased spending by both candidates. The correlation coefficient between incumbent and challenger spending is 0.17. Second, I calculate the variance inflation factors (VIFs) for each coefficient. Two variables have VIFs larger than 10: *1-Party Contest* and the interaction term *1-Party x Log Incumbent Spending*. If this interaction term is omitted from the model, the VIF for *1-Party* drops to 4.44. Regression output for the model with this interaction term omitted is reported in column 2 of Table 12 in Appendix 2.B. In this model, the coefficient for the variable of interest, the interaction term *1-Party x Log Challenger Spending*, is still significant. The substantive finding remains: challengers in one-party contests earn more than twice as many votes per dollar spent than those in two-party contests.

[20]There were 37 observations with $D_i > n$-$k$-1: 21 1-party contests and 16 2-party contests. With these 37 observations removed, the interaction term of (*Log Challenger Spending*) x (*1-Party Contest*) remains significant at the .05 level. Regression results of the model without influential cases still finds that challengers in 1-party contests earn more than twice as many votes per dollar than challengers in 2-party contests. In fact, with influential cases removed, the effect size increases: challengers in 1-party contests earn nearly three times as many votes per dollar spent when compared to challengers in 2-party contests. The adjusted $R^2$ increases to .74 with influential cases removed.

*Table 3:* Effects on Challenger Vote Share

| | Coefficient |
|---|---|
| (Intercept) | $24.98^*$ |
| | $(4.04)$ |
| One-Party Contest (1 = Yes) | $-23.15^*$ |
| | $(7.49)$ |
| Log Challenger Spending | $0.41^*$ |
| | $(0.06)$ |
| Log Ch. Spending x 1-Party Contest | $0.48^*$ |
| | $(0.16)$ |
| Log Incumbent Spending | $0.84^*$ |
| | $(0.36)$ |
| Log Inc. Spending x 1-Party Contest | $1.55^*$ |
| | $(0.63)$ |
| District Ideology | $19.65^*$ |
| | $(1.10)$ |
| District Ideology x 1-Party Contest | $-21.58^*$ |
| | $(2.60)$ |
| Incumbent Previous Win Margin | $0.13^*$ |
| | $(0.02)$ |
| Challenger Party (1 = Dem) | $-4.90^*$ |
| | $(0.62)$ |
| Quality Challenger | $1.98^*$ |
| | $(0.68)$ |
| California | $-1.83^*$ |
| | $(0.78)$ |
| 2008 | $-0.57$ |
| | $(0.79)$ |
| 2010 | $1.19$ |
| | $(0.83)$ |
| 2012 | $1.61^*$ |
| | $(0.67)$ |
| 2014 | $0.42$ |
| | $(0.65)$ |
| $N$ | 529 |
| $R^2$ | 0.67 |
| adj. $R^2$ | 0.66 |
| Resid. sd | 5.16 |

Standard errors in parentheses

$^*$ indicates significance at $p < 0.05$

.1 level with this smaller sample. Results are consistent with the broader analysis, finding that challengers in one-party contests maintain a strong advantage by earning approximately 60% more votes per dollar spent than those running in two-party contests. Results are presented in column 4 of Table 12.

To investigate the possibility that results are confounded by systematic variation among the independent variables between one-party and two-party contests, I use propensity score matching to estimate the average treatment effect of running in a one-party contest. Using the `MatchIt`[21] package in R, I employ nearest-neighbor matching with a caliper of .2 standard deviations. This method matched 46 of the 50 one-party contests to 46 two-party contests across a series of covariates.[22] Figure 1 in Appendix 2.D presents the distribution of propensity scores for matched and unmatched treatment and control groups. I run OLS regression with these 92 matched observations, with challenger vote share as the dependent variable and one-party contest as the independent variable. All else equal, the average treatment effect of running in a one-party contest provides a 5.40 percentage point increase in challenger vote share within the matched sample, significant at the .05 level. Results are presented in Table 17 in Appendix 2.D.

Column 5 in Table 12 presents results for observations that occurred prior to the adoption of the top-two primary. This model includes only contests from 2006 in Washington and 2010 in California, the cycles that immediately preceded implementation of the reform in each state.

**Investigating the role of independent expenditures**

An alternative explanation for these findings is unrelated to the role of voter information altogether. Rather, one possibility is that parties and interest groups direct their independent expenditures towards two-party races because they believe that their finite resources are best spent contesting seats where party control is in question. Given the

[21]Ho, Daniel, Kosuke Imai, Gary King, and Elizabeth Stuart. 2011. "MatchIt: Nonparametric Preprocessing for Parametric Causal Inference." *Journal of Statistical Software*, 42: 1-28. http://www.jstatsoft.org/v42/i08/

[22]Observations were matched according to challenger spending, incumbent spending, incumbent previous win margin, quality challenger, upper chamber, state, and year.

diminishing returns of campaign spending for vote share as totals increase (Gerber 1998), the disproportionate direction of independent expenditures into two-party contests may explain why challengers in one-party contests see a greater return for each dollar spent. To determine the viability of this explanation, I coded each contest with the amount of independent expenditures made on behalf of both the incumbent and the challenger using data available online from the Washington Public Disclosure Commission[23] and Cal-Access[24] websites. Independent expenditures that are listed as opposing the incumbent are included with the challenger's totals, while expenditures classified as opposing the challenger are included with the incumbent's totals. Descriptive statistics of independent expediture data are presented in Tables 7 and 8 in Appendix 2.C.

To best capture the mechanism of diminishing returns per dollar spent, I combine candidate spending and independent expenditures on the candidate's behalf into a single total and then logarithmically transform that total. In Appendix 2.B, column 3 in Table 12 presents OLS regression output when independent expenditures are included with candidate spending. In this model, the coefficients for challenger spending and the interaction term between challenger spending and one-party contests both remain significant at the .05 level. Here, a challenger in a two-party contest can expect to receive an average 0.42 percentage point increase in vote share for every 100% increase in spending, while a challenger in a one-party contest can expect to earn a .82 percentage point increase for every 100% increase in spending. When independent expenditures are included, challengers in one-party contests can still expect to earn nearly twice as many votes per dollar spent.

**Effects for spending in higher-information campaign environments**

To further test the theoretical argument, I perform the same analysis with U.S. House candidates. Congressional elections are likely to enjoy greater media attention and general voter awareness than state legislative elections. When candidates are running in higher-information environments, the benefit of spending in the absence of differentiating

[23]http://www.pdc.wa.gov

[24]http://cal-access.ss.ca.gov

party labels should be weaker. Thus, the observed effect of candidates in one-party legislative contests earning twice as many votes per dollar should be smaller at the congressional level.

For this analysis, I include all U.S. House elections in California and Washington from 2012-2016.[25] There were a total of 153 contests with both an incumbent and challenger on the general election ballot during this period. Of those, 16 were one-party contests and 137 were two-party contests.[26] Data were collected in the same manner as with state legislative seats, with two modifications. First, spending data were collected from the Federal Elections Commission rather than the respective secretaries of state. Second, congressional district-level ideology scores were used from Tausonovitch and Warshaw's American Ideology Project[27].

Regression results for congressional contests are reported in column 6 of Table 12. The coefficient for challenger spending is positive and significant, but the interaction term between challenger spending and one-party contests is not statistically significant. Challengers in one-party congressional contests enjoy no advantage in the number of votes they earn per dollar spent when compared to challengers in two-party congressional contests.

**Discussion**

Many have replicated the finding that challengers will, on average, earn more votes when their campaigns spend more money. In the present study, I have expanded our understanding of this effect by showing that electoral rules are likely to dictate the degree to which challengers are able to translate their dollars into votes. In fact, a challenger running in a single-party contest can expect to typically increase their vote share at double the pace per dollar spent when compared to challengers in two-party contests. Ultimately, the present findings provide evidence that the effects of campaign money are muted when party labels provide meaningful information to voters. However, in the absence of differentiating party cues to guide vote choice, the information provided by campaign expenditures has a much larger effect for increasing challenger vote share and overcoming the advantages inherent to

[25]There were no one-party congressional contests in Washington in 2008 or 2010.

[26]Descriptive statistics of these data are reported in Table 16 in Appendix 2.C.

[27]http://www.americanideologyproject.com

incumbency. Put simply, challengers in one-party contests are able to get a bigger bang for their buck, which better equips them to overcome the inherent advantages of both funding and name recognition enjoyed by incumbents.

When reformers implemented the top-two primary, one intended goal was to increase electoral competition when two candidates of the same party proceed to a runoff in the general election in traditionally safe districts (Pildes 2011). While little research to date measures whether the top-two primary has increased competition, the present study fills this gap by offering evidence that it does indeed provide opportunities for greater competitiveness in single-party contests. Advocates of the top-two primary, as well as those who lament the lack of electoral competition in legislative elections, may be encouraged by these findings.

The results of this study also suggest a reconceptualization of what constitutes a "safe" district. When single-party general election contests occur in top-two primary states, it is most often in districts that are among the safest for one party or the other. In such districts, potential candidates that have ambitions for elected office may be dissuaded from running when an incumbent chooses to seek re-election, especially if they are from the same party. However, quality candidate entry is one of the most important factors that affects whether incumbents retain their seats (Jacobson 1989; Hetherington et al 2003). Nationwide, nearly half of legislative seats were uncontested in 2016 (Greenblatt 2016), with a lack of competitive contests offering little motivation for legislators to be responsive to their districts. However, prospective candidates in top-two primary states that would normally be deterred from challenging a sitting legislator should view the results of this study as evidence that they face better electoral odds if they challenge a member of their own party in a safe district.

## CHAPTER 3: CANDIDATE RHETORIC AND POLARIZATION [28]

In many ways, primary elections advance the interests of extreme party factions. In part, primary candidates are likely to adopt extreme views to cater to passionate partisan voters (Brady et al. 2007), who are likely to prefer extreme candidates that align with the party base (Nielson and Visalvanich 2016). In recent years, moderate incumbents in both parties have increasingly been eliminated in primaries by more extreme challengers. Although Downs (1957) theorized that rational candidates should converge to the median voter in the general election, very few legislative and congressional districts are competitive in the general election today. As a result, much evidence finds that most candidates do not converge in down-ballot contests (Burden 2004; Frendreis et al. 2003).

Under the top-two primary, all candidates for a given office run against each other in a single blanket primary, regardless of party. Whichever two candidates receive the most votes will then proceed to a runoff in the general election. Many have decried that runoff elections between two candidates of the same party are the ultimate advancement of extreme partisan interests (Feinstein 2016; Greenhut 2016). In this paper, I investigate candidate rhetoric under the top-two primary and find evidence to the contrary. As I will argue, new electoral rules encourage candidates to appeal to a broader range of voters in one-party contests.

For several years leading up to 2009, California was home to the most polarized state legislature in the nation (Shor and McCarty 2011). During the Great Recession, this polarization contributed to a budget stalemate in which Democrats needed one Republican vote to reach the two-thirds supermajority threshold required for revenue increases. State Senator Abel Moldenado, a moderate Republican, offered to support the budget if Democrats supported a voter referendum that, if passed, would implement the top-two primary.

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[28] This chapter is a forthcoming article in *Political Communication* entitled "Polarization and the top-two primary: Moderating candidate rhetoric in one-party contests." Accepted January 22, 2019. Citation details were not yet available by the date of submission to the College of Arts and Sciences.

Moldenado saw the reform as an opportunity to prevent future stalemates by creating an environment conducive to consensus and bipartisanship. If moderates could more easily survive the polarized primary process, he reasoned, the ideological distance between the median chamber Democrat and Republican might narrow (Caen 2015).

Prior examination of legislative elections under the top-two primary, however, finds that voters do not select the more moderate of two same-party candidates because they lack the information to make preference-consistent choices (Ahler et al. 2016). This is unsurprising, given that legislative elections are low-information contests in which voters are notoriously uninformed (Gierzynski and Breaux 1991; Squire and Moncrief 2015). I investigate another pathway through which Moldenado's aspirations to invoke moderation may be realized. Top-two primaries change the mix of opponents that candidates face, thus altering the electorate to which they must respond. When candidates face a same-party general election opponent, they can no longer rely on party-based voting to win. In such contests, every voter and constituency may be persuadable. Thus, candidates in one-party contests should face pressures to broaden the set of voters to whom they appeal, even in districts that strongly favor one party. Much research supports this theory, showing that the presence of electoral competition leads candidates to adjust their campaign strategies (Banda and Carsey 2015; Fowler 2005) and encourages responsiveness to the median voter (Ansolabehere et al. 2001; Hayes et al. 2002).

To test this expectation, I evaluate the rhetoric found on the campaign websites of state legislative candidates in California and Washington during the 2016 election. I compare the rhetoric used by candidates facing same-party and opposite-party opponents, finding strong evidence that candidates in same-party contests use more bipartisan, moderate, and vague language than those in two-party contests. Furthermore, the presence of a same-party contest conditions the issues that candidates talk about, how they talk about those issues, and encourages more endorsements from groups that typically support the opposite party.

**Voter behavior and the top-two primary**

Diffusion of the top-two primary beyond Louisiana has inspired many to investigate the consequences of the reform. Findings reveal the degree to which voters fulfill reformers'

expectations of invoking moderation in one-party contests. First, an experiment during the 2012 general election in California found that moderate candidates in one-party contests fared no better than their more liberal or conservative opponents. Even when voters preferred the more centrist option, the study found that voters lacked the information necessary to distinguish between two same-party options (Ahler et al. 2016). Second, when both candidates are from the same party, voters from the opposite party are much more likely to abstain from voting in that contest rather than supporting the ideologically-proximate choice (Fisk 2017; Nagler 2015). Finally, even when voters are informed, evidence suggests that many moderates vote based on factors unrelated to ideology or issue preferences altogether (Adams et al. 2017).

Collectively, these findings cast doubt on the idea that voters will invoke moderation in state legislative elections under the top-two primary. This should be no surprise, given that legislative elections are low-information contests in which voters typically have very little knowledge (Gierzynski and Breaux 1991; Squire and Moncrief 2015). Attention to legislative elections makes up only three percent of campaign-related local news coverage (Kaplan, Goldstein, and Hale 2003). In one-party contests under the top-two primary, the combined absence of media attention and helpful party cues means that the information conveyed by campaign spending has a greater influence on vote choice. Challengers running against a same-party incumbent in the general election earn twice as many votes per dollar than those running against an opposite-party incumbent (Sparks 2018).

While prior research finds no evidence that voters impose moderation in one-party contests, there is reason to expect that new electoral conditions may encourage any number of changes in candidate behavior. One possibility is that candidates will respond as critics expected: by becoming even more ideologically extreme. Same-party contests disproportionately occur in lopsided districts that strongly favor one party (Highton et al. 2016). In such districts, extreme challengers have increasingly found success in unseating moderate incumbents in the primary, a trend which could make moderation appear to be the riskier strategy. Moreover, candidates in one-party contests may try to position themselves as their party's standard-bearer because they perceive that the endorsement and financial support

of their party and allied groups will be crucial to success. This incentive may likewise encourage candidates to exclusively target base voters. These potential pressures, however, should be outweighed by incentives for candidates to broaden their appeal beyond the party base. I argue that the pressures candidates face in one-party general election contests are distinct from those that they face in primaries and in most two-party general elections. One-party contests produce electoral uncertainty and broaden the constituency to whom candidates are accountable. Combined, these pressures should encourage candidates to self-impose moderation when facing a same-party opponent.

**Candidate behavior and the top-two primary**

Interviews with California state legislators lend anecdotal insight by showing how the top-two primary liberates lawmakers from the confines of strict party discipline. Republican State Senator Anthony Cannella explains that the top-two system enabled him to co-sponsor bipartisan legislation permitting undocumented immigrants to obtain drivers licenses, an issue he previously avoided. His Republican colleagues likewise perceived that their re-election constituencies now expand beyond the extreme wing of primary voters (Olson and Ali 2015). This example illustrates how the top-two primary may reshape candidate and legislator behavior as electoral incentives change. The perceived risk of backlash from party base voters when candidates demonstrate bipartisanship is diminished with this change in electoral rules.

Conventional wisdom has long held that candidates maximize their electoral prospects by making calculated decisions about how they present themselves to voters. Mayhew theorized that rational candidates should consider every decision they make in the context of how it will help or hurt them on Election Day because winning is a prerequisite to all other goals (1974). Fenno showed how candidates change the way that they talk about issues depending on context, audience, and electoral conditions (1978). Downs theorized that rational candidates should diverge to the extremes for the primary election and then converge to the center for the general election (1957). In this spirit, Romney strategist Eric Fehrnstrom famously remarked that the two-stage election process enables candidates to behave "almost like an Etch-A-Sketch. You can kind of shake it up and restart all over again [after the primary]" (Shear 2012).

Much work supports the notion that candidates do diverge to the ideological extremes for the primary election (Brady et al. 2007; Fiorina 1974; Polsby 1980). Some find evidence that candidates do converge back towards the median for general election in U.S. Senate (Wright and Berkman 1986), gubernatorial (Carsey 2000), and presidential elections (Acree et al. 2013). Others find that Downsian theory does not hold up in U.S. House and legislative contests, with candidates in these contexts instead largely remaining at the ideological extremes for the general election (Aldrich and Coleman Battista 2002; Burden 2004; Frendreis et al. 2003).

A likely explanation for this difference is that most U.S. House and legislative elections are not competitive, thus, most candidates lack incentive to court the median voter. Nationwide, only 30% of legislative seats are decided by fewer than 20 percentage points, with only 15% of seats decided by fewer than 10 percentage points (Carsey et al. 2008). From 2003 to 2014, one-third of all legislative seats were uncontested. During the 2013-2014 cycle, more than half of seats were uncontested in 13 states. This lack of competitiveness is intensified by a stark imbalance in candidate fundraising, with only 18% of legislative contests being monetarily competitive[29] in 2013-2014 (Holden 2016). This resource imbalance prevents both candidates enjoying the same quality of staff support, advertising, and voter outreach strategies, thus tipping the scales even more in favor of one candidate.

Furthermore, very few voters are persuadable. Although 40% of voters identify as independents, 85% of independents demonstrate voting behavior indistinguishable from their partisan counterparts (Smith 2016). This effect is more pronounced in low-information contests such as legislative elections, where voters are most likely to rely on party labels to guide their vote choices (Schaffner and Streb 2002). Combined with the lopsided nature of most legislative contests, this means the outcome is often a foregone conclusion. In most races, candidates are practically guaranteed to win or lose by virtue of party labels alone.

When both candidates are from the same party in the general election, however, they can no longer rely on party-based voting to win. If candidates cannot reliably predict for

[29] A contest is considered monetarily competitive if the candidate with fewer campaign funds raised at least half as much as their opponent.

whom Republicans and Democrats will vote, they should respond accordingly. I argue that the presence of one-party general election contests should create uncertainty and competitiveness that is not present in most two-party contests at the legislative level. This should incentivize candidates to self-moderate their rhetoric in an effort to appeal to as many voters as possible.

The proposition that candidates should moderate their behavior against a same-party opponent relies on two premises: first, that candidates behave as though issues matter to voters, and second, that candidates adjust their campaign strategies based on contextual factors. There is much evidence that candidates behave as though voters are paying attention and that candidates are responsive to those voters when electoral pressure exists. Ansolabehere et al. (2001) find that while national and state party pressures influence candidate position-taking, that district-level voter preferences likewise matter. King (1997) demonstrates how signs of vulnerability lead candidates to engage in risk-averse behavior. Fowler (2005) shows how candidates calibrate their campaign platforms in response to the outcome of the previous election. Lawmakers also adapt legislative efforts in response to changes in the demographic makeup of their districts after redistricting (Hayes, Hibbing, and Sulkin 2010; Overby and Cosgrove 1996). Even if most voters are largely inattentive, many credit interest groups, challengers, and the media for monitoring behavior and alerting voters when candidates stray from the district median (Canes-Wrone et al. 2002; Carsey 2000).

There is likewise much evidence that candidates make calculated decisions based on electoral context. First, candidates do not simply stick to their own message, rather, they anticipate what their opponents might say and respond to what they have actually said (Carsey et al. 2011). Third-tier candidates are most likely to discuss policy and ideology, while first and second-tier candidates are more likely to discuss polls, endorsements, and opponents (Haynes et al. 2002). Wright and Berkman (1986) find that U.S. Senate candidates are largely responsive to their base voters during the early years of their six-year terms, but that they shift their policy attention towards responding to centrist voters as the next election approaches. These are just a few examples, but taken together they support the importance of context for shaping the strategies that candidates employ.

**Expectations**

If candidates behave as though issues matter to voters, are responsive when incentivized, and adjust strategy based on context, then the top-two primary should encourage candidates in same-party contests to broaden their appeal. Imagine a district that reliably votes 70% Democratic and 30% Republican. Under traditional primary rules, neither candidate has incentive to temper their message when the outcome of the general election is a foregone conclusion. Now, suppose that two Democrats face each other in the general election in that same district, and suppose that they expect to split the Democratic vote. The 30% of voters who were once irrelevant may now theoretically swing the election. To be clear, the argument is not that Democratic candidates in a 70/30 district will become conservatives or even centrists. Rather, I expect that they should adjust at least somewhat towards a closer approximation of the district median than they would under traditional primary rules. In doing so, they should use more moderate and bipartisan rhetoric in their campaign messaging.

If correct, there are several behaviors we should expect to observe. First, candidates in one-party contests seeking to broaden the range of voters to whom they appeal should make fewer mentions of their party identity, fewer clear statements about the ideological direction of their views, and more statements about the importance of bipartisanship.

Second, candidates in one-party contests should be more likely to advertise endorsements from ideological groups or partisan figures that typically support the opposite party. Endorsements send signals about a candidate's policy preferences, from which voters form evaluations about that candidate (McDermott 2006). If candidates in one-party contests seek to broaden their appeal, a larger proportion of their endorsements should be from beyond their traditional coalitions.

Finally, I expect same-party contests to condition the issues that candidates discuss and the positions they take on those issues. Simply discussing issues that are regarded as being "owned" by one party gives voters the perception that candidates share ideological space with that party, even in the absence of any clear directional position (Banda 2016). Candidates aiming to broaden their appeal should discuss more issues owned by the opposite party, be more vague in their discussion of policy preferences, and clearly indicate fewer

positions in agreement with their own party.

**Data**

To evaluate the degree to which candidates fulfill these expectations, I analyze the content of campaign websites for state legislative candidates in California and Washington[30] during the 2016 election. I select websites as the best data source using the criteria proposed by Druckman et al. (2009). First, websites are unfiltered communications direct from each campaign, whereas media coverage or interest group ratings are colored by the lens of the journalist or group. Second, websites represent a comprehensive view of candidates' positions, whereas voter guide statements are often restricted to as few as 100 words (Druckman et al. 2009).

*Table 4:* Descriptive statistics of candidates included in the analysis

| | **California** | | **Washington** | | **Total** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***Total candidates on ballot*** | **199** | | **218** | | **417** | |
| *Candidates in contested races* | 197 | *99%* | 188 | *86%* | 385 | *92%* |
| *Contested candidates with websites* | 143 | *72%* | 163 | *75%* | 306 | *73%* |
| ***Contested candidates with websites...*** | **143** | | **163** | | **306** | |
| *...Facing same-party opponent* | 31 | *22%* | 15 | *9%* | 46 | *15%* |
| *... In safe districts* | 90 | *63%* | 84 | *52%* | 174 | *57%* |
| *...Democrats* | 81 | *57%* | 80 | *49%* | 161 | *53%* |
| *...Republicans* | 61 | *43%* | 74 | *45%* | 135 | *44%* |
| *...Independent* | 1 | *1%* | 9 | *6%* | 10 | *3%* |

| | **Min.** | **1Q** | **Med.** | **Mean** | **3Q** | **Max.** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Total pages per website* | 1.0 | 3.0 | 4.0 | 3.8 | 4.0 | 13.0 |
| *Total words per website* | 116 | 1054 | 1624 | 2087 | 2735 | 8674 |

I use the California and Washington Secretary of State websites to identify the universe of contested legislative candidates. Those running in uncontested races are excluded because they have neither electoral pressure nor motivation to be concerned with how they position themselves. I then search for the campaign website of each contested candidate. Several methods are employed: Google searches, lists from state party websites, links listed in voter guide statements, links from social media pages, and local print media coverage. Through this process, I am able to successfully find websites for approximately 80% of all contested candidates in California and Washington, which includes a total of 306 candidate websites. Ten sites belonging to independent candidates are excluded because the central

[30]Louisiana is not included because it did not hold state legislative elections in 2016.

question investigates the behavior of partisans under varying electoral conditions. This provides a total sample of 296 websites.

*Table 5:* Descriptive statistics of additional covariates, by contest type

| **Variable** | **Min.** | **1Q** | **Med.** | **Mean** | **3Q** | **Max.** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| District Ideology (Lower = favorable for candidate) | | | | | | |
| 1-party contests | -1.22 | -0.58 | -0.38 | -0.44 | -0.11 | 0.00 |
| 2-party contests | -1.27 | -0.22 | -0.02 | -0.02 | 0.16 | 1.15 |
| Incumbent Previous Win (50 = most competitive) | | | | | | |
| 1-party contests | 0.00 | 20.05 | 30.85 | 27.98 | 40.20 | 49.50 |
| 2-party contests | 0.00 | 32.64 | 40.32 | 36.45 | 44.33 | 49.93 |
| **Variable** | **1-party contests** | | | **2-party contests** | | |
| Upper Chamber | 11 of 46 candidates (24%) | | | 45 of 250 candidates (18%) | | |
| Democrat | 13 of 46 candidates (28%) | | | 127 of 250 candidates (51%) | | |
| Challenger | 10 of 46 candidates (22%) | | | 91 of 250 candidates (36%) | | |
| Open seat | 25 of 46 candidates (54%) | | | 50 of 250 candidates (20%) | | |
| **Margin btw. Clinton/Trump in district** | **Min.** | **Mean** | **Med.** | **Max.** | | |
| All candidates | 0% | 31% | 29% | 83% | | |
| Candidates in 1-party contests | 8% | 41% | 43% | 83% | | |

Snapshots of each website were saved during the two weeks prior to the November 8, 2016 election. When available, data include the 'Home,' 'About,' 'Issues,' and 'Endorsements' pages from each site. If candidates had multiple pages for separate issues, each 'Issues' subpage is included. No additional pages are included in the analysis. Descriptive statistics of the candidates and websites included in the data are presented in Table 4. Descriptive statistics comparing candidates in one-party and two-party contests across several covariates are presented in Table 5.

## Methods

*Coding website content*

I code the content each website on several measures to test the theoretical expectation that candidates in one-party contests will have websites that use more moderate and bipartisan rhetoric than those in two-party contests. The coded count or proportion for each of the following variables is cumulative across all captured pages of the website. These counts and proportions then serve as dependent variables for a series of seven regressions. To validate coding decisions made by the author, a research assistant coded a random sample of 47 of the 296 websites.[31]

[31] Krippendorff's alpha reliability coefficients are calculated to compare the results of hand coding by the

First, candidates may signal ideology or policy preferences to voters through mentions of their party affiliation. Here, I count the number of times that the candidate's party label appears on their website. This includes mentions of the party within the website text as well as identifying symbols in the header and footer, such as the shorthand "(Dem.)" or "D" next to the candidate's name.

Second, I code for the total number of bipartisan appeals made by each candidate. I define bipartisan rhetoric by following the collective works of several scholars. In this paper, bipartisan language may convey a desire for the candidate to transcend partisan politics (Rhodes and Albert 2017), call for compromise and cooperation between the two parties (Rhodes 2014), or claim independence from their own party (Trubowitz and Mellow 2005). Examples are listed in the coding scheme in Appendix 3.A.

Third, I code the count of clear ideological statements. Such statements indicate a clear ideological direction of the candidate's views by mentioning either their own values or ideology, or those of the opposition. Statements about specific issue positions are not included here, as they are accounted for by a separate category below. Examples of clear ideological statements include "I will work hard to defend our conservative Eastern Washington values in Olympia," which references the candidate's own ideological position, or "If you send me to Sacramento, I will prevent big-government liberals from destroying our way of life," which references the opposition. In either case, the text offers clear directional signals about the candidate's ideology.

Fourth, I code for endorsements that convey ideological, partisan, or policy-related signals. What matters here is whether such endorsements send meaningful information to voters about a candidate's policy preferences (McDermott 2006). As name recognition and familiarity are low at the U.S. House level and below, endorsements from down-ballot elected officials are not included unless the party affiliation is listed. Categories of groups that are

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author and by the research assistant. In computing Krippendorff's alpha, the comparison made is between the total number of mentions coded by the author and the total number coded by the research assistant, cumulative across all included pages of each candidate's website. Computations are made using assumptions for ratio-level data. Krippendorff's alpha for each of the 7 dependent variables are as follows: party affiliation mentions, 0.80; bipartisan statements, 0.70; ideological statements, 0.76; endorsements, 0.71; party-owned issues, 0.54; vague issue positions, 0.50; party-congruent issue positions, 0.67.

coded to convey either conservative or liberal signals are listed in Appendix 3.A.

Fifth, the issues that candidates discuss send important signals of candidate ideology, even in the absence of a clear position on that issue (Banda 2016). Therefore, I code for the number of issues mentioned that are owned by the Republican and Democratic parties. To classify which issues are owned by which party, I follow Banda (2013) as detailed in Appendix 3.A.[32]

Finally, I code for the ideological direction of each candidate's issue positions. If there is no clear ideological or partisan direction, then it is coded as a vague position. Otherwise, it is coded for whether the candidate adopts the position consistent with her own party or if it signals agreement with the opposite party. Partisan agreement on issue positions is determined by referencing the California and Washington state party platforms, as indicated in part 6 of Appendix 3.A. Summary statistics from all hand coding are presented in Table 6.

*Regression analysis*

Seven regressions model how the presence of a one-party contest conditions each dependent variable. The dependent variable for three models are counts: the number of party mentions, the number of bipartisan statements, and the number of ideological statements. All three count models use negative binomial regression.[33] Four dependent variables are proportions modeled with ordinary least squares regression: the proportion of ideological endorsements from groups that typically support the opposite party, the proportion of issues owned by the opposite party, the proportion of issue positions that are vague or nondirectional, and the proportion of issue positions that are congruent with the candidate's own party.[34] In each model, the independent variable of interest is whether each candidate is

[32]The economy is notably absent from the list of party-owned issues in Appendix 3.A, yet it is an issue that is likely mentioned by candidates of both parties. It is not included here because the state of the economy is a performance issue rather than a party-owned issue. As Banda (2013) notes, performance issues and party-owned issues are distinct in that parties enjoy only unstable, short-term advantages on performance issues, but benefit from stable, long-term advantages on party-owned issues.

[33]Several tests were used to evaluate model fit, including Akaike's information criterion (AIC), Vuong statistics for non-nested models, and likelihood ratio tests. Negative binomial was selected as the best-fitting count model for all three dependent variables.

[34]Candidate issue positions may fall into one of the following three categories: party-congruent,

in a one-party contest (one party contest = 1).

Legislative district-level ideology scores are included as an independent variable to account for how the distribution of liberal and conservative voters in each district, as well as the strength of their preferences, may condition candidate behavior. Developed by Tausonovitch and Warshaw (2013) in the American Ideology Project,[35] these scores are centered around 0, with negative scores indicating that a district's constituency is more liberal and positive scores that a district is more conservative. I reverse the directional sign of the district score for each Republican candidate. Thus, a negative score for any candidate indicates that the district favors her party while a positive score indicates that it favors the opposite party.[36]

As past election results affect the positions candidates take in future campaigns (Fowler 2005), I include the previous vote margin for each contest. I employ Gierzynsky and Breaux's (1991) formula[37], such that the coded value gets larger as competitiveness increases. Two-party contests with large previous win margins should provide candidates with little or no incentive to court voters from the center and opposite party. The opposite should be true, however, in one-party contests because facing a same-party opponent invokes uncertainty and electoral risk that was likely absent in the previous election. Meanwhile, candidates in marginal districts should be expected to appeal to moderate and opposite-party voters regardless of the party of their opponent.

There is much evidence that candidates facing electoral vulnerability are more likely to "run scared" than those who are electorally safe, tailoring their policy positions and rhetoric

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vague/nondirectional, or party-incongruent. The proportions for DVs relating to issue positions are calculated as a proportion of all issue positions.

[35]http://www.americanideologyproject.com

[36]I choose Tausonovitch and Warshaw's ideology scores as the best available measure for district-level voter preferences. Party registration data offer one alternative, however, this measure cannot be used because voters in Washington do not declare a party affiliation. Another possibility is to use district-level presidential vote share, but as others have shown, this is problematic because presidential vote share is subject to strong influence from short-term factors (Levendusky et al. 2008; Tausonovitch and Warshaw 2013).

[37]Previous margin = 50 - absolute value (winning candidate's vote share - 50)

in ways that will broaden their appeal to maximize their chance of victory (King 1997). In this way, candidates in two-party contests in competitive districts should be more likely to self-moderate their behavior, but those in uncompetitive districts should not. Thus, in more competitive districts, candidates in one-party and two-party contests should both be likely to use more moderate, bipartisan, nonpartisan, or vague rhetoric. In uncompetitive districts, the differences in rhetoric between candidates in one-party and two-party contests should be greatest. For this reason, I include an interaction term between one-party contest and previous win margin. Nearly all one-party contests in the present analysis occur in seats where the contest in the preceding election cycle was between one Democrat and one Republican.[38]

Finally, I include the number of same-party opponents in the primary election to account for the possibility that increased competition induces candidates to stake out ideologically-divergent positions. I also include controls for whether the candidate is a challenger, incumbent, or in an open seat,[39][40] running for an upper chamber, and include a dummy variable for California.

*Propensity score matching*

A possible concern is the degree to which candidates in one and two-party contests are directly comparable in this analysis. To investigate the possibility that results are confounded

[38]I performed F-tests to evaluate the addition of the interaction term for each of the 7 dependent variables. The interaction term improves model fit with the first 4 DVs (party ID, bipartisan statements, ideological statements, and endorsements) but does not improve model fit for the final 3 DVs (the types of issues discussed, vague issue positions, and party-congruent issue positions). The presence of a one-party contest conditions candidates' mentions of party ID, bipartisan statements, ideological statements, and endorsements with a strongest effect in districts with larger previous win margins, while the presence a one-party contest uniformly conditions how candidates talk about issues across all contests and contests.

[39]Indicator variables for challengers are dropped from all models to avoid perfect multicollinearity.

[40]One possibility is that front-runners or incumbents may make candidates less inclined to broaden their appeal than challengers or those running for open seats. While adequate polling data for state legislative seats are not available, I test this possibility with an interaction term between incumbent status and the presence of a one-party contest. F-tests indicate that the interaction term does not improve model fit for any of the dependent variables. I provide comparisons of predicted outcomes for incumbents and non-incumbents in one-party contests, presented in Figures 11-17 in Appendix 3.D. For 6 of the dependent variables, the expected outcomes for incumbents and non-incumbents are statistically indistinguishable. For cross-ideological endorsements, there is a significant difference but it is in the opposite direction: incumbents are expected to have a greater proportion of cross-ideological endorsements than non-incumbents. This is unsurprising, however, given the high re-election rates of incumbents and the benefits that interest groups receive during the legislative process by supporting incumbent officeholders, even when they are from the opposition party (Hall and Wayman 1990).

by systematic variation among the independent variables, I also use propensity score matching to estimate the average treatment effect of running in a one-party contest. Since same-party contests are most likely to occur in districts that offer a strong electoral advantage to one party, matching provides an opportunity to account for this by comparing candidates that are similar across all covariates. I use two measures to account for district characteristics: Tausonovitch and Warshaw's district ideology score and the seat's win margin in the previous election. Using the `MatchIt`[41] package in R, I employ nearest-neighbor matching with a caliper of .2 standard deviations. Matching analysis is performed for each of the seven dependent variables across a series of covariates.[42] Descriptive statistics for these two variables in the matched samples are presented in Table 18 in Appendix 3.C. For each of the 7 dependent variables, I run a simple OLS or negative binomial regression with one-party contest as the independent variable.

**Results**

Summary statistics of website hand coding are presented in Table 6. For 6 of the 7 dependent variables, data patterns between one-party and two-party contests are consistent with expectations and statistically significantly different. Candidates in one-party contests made fewer mentions of their party identity, fewer clear ideological statements, and a smaller proportion of party-congruent issue positions than those in two-party contests. Candidates in one-party contests also made more bipartisan statements, took a larger proportion of vague issue positions, and a larger share of their endorsements came from across ideological lines. There was no significant difference for the proportion of issues owned by the opposite party.

Regression and matching results find strong support for the expectation that candidates in one-party contests will use more moderate, bipartisan, and vague rhetoric on their websites than candidates in two-party contests, all else equal. The difference between the predicted outcome for one and two-party contests is in the expected direction for all seven dependent

[41]Ho, Daniel, Kosuke Imai, Gary King, and Elizabeth Stuart. 2011. "MatchIt: Nonparametric Preprocessing for Parametric Causal Inference." *Journal of Statistical Software*, 42: 1-28. http://www.jstatsoft.org/v42/i08/

[42]Observations were matched according to the following variables: district voter ideology, previous win margin for the seat, candidate party, state, and candidate type (incumbent, challenger, open seat).

*Table 6:* Summary statistics of website hand coding, by type of contest

| | Party mentions (count) | Bipartisan statements (count) | Ideological statements (count) | Cross-party endorsements (proportion) | Issues owned by opp. party (proportion) | Vague positions (proportion) | Own-party agreement (proportion) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1-party contests | 2.07 | 1.20 | 0.28 | 0.21 | 0.35 | 0.54 | 0.17 |
| 2-party contests | 3.77* | 0.84 | 0.71 | 0.06* | 0.34 | 0.32* | 0.40* |
| 2-party (Safe only) | 3.93* | 0.51* | 0.69 | 0.06* | 0.31 | 0.28* | 0.39* |
| 2-party (Marginal) | 3.59* | 1.19 | 0.73† | 0.06* | 0.38 | 0.35* | 0.40* |

*Statistically significantly different from 1-party contests at $p < .05$ level.

†Statistically significantly different from 1-party contests at $p < .10$ level.

variables and reaches statistical significance in most. While results are largely consistent between regression and matching, there are a couple of instances detailed below in which either regression or matching results are significant, but not both. Discrepancies are likely attributable to achieving balance in the distribution of covariates in the treated and control groups in the matched sample. Variables falling in or out of statistical significance may also be related to the substantially smaller sample size with which the matching analysis is performed. Full regression results are presented in Table 7. Results from the matching analyses are presented in Table 8. Predicted outcomes are presented graphically for all seven dependent variables in Appendix 3.B. Figures 8, 9, and 10 in Appendix 3.C display the distribution of propensity scores for matched and unmatched treatment and control groups.

*Mentions of party affiliation*: The first column in Table 7 presents negative binomial regression results when the dependent variable is the number of times that the candidate indicates her party affiliation. I expected that candidates in one-party contests would make fewer mentions of their party identity than those in two-party contests. Results support this expectation, predicting that candidates in one-party contests will mention their party identity 1.85 times, while candidates in two-party contests will mention their party identity 2.95 times, all else equal. This finding is statistically significant.[43]

Propensity score matching analysis supports these findings. Of the 296 Democrats and Republicans in the dataset, 46 ran in one-party contests and 250 ran in two-party contests.

[43]In Table 7, coefficients for the presence of a one-party contest are positive for models 1 and 3, however, the interaction term complicates direct interpretation. Expected counts and matching models in Table 8 allow a more direct interpretation of differences in candidate behavior in one-party and two-party contests.

*Table 7:* Full regression results for all dependent variables

| **Dep. Variable** | Party ID mentions | Bipartisan statements | Ideological statements | Cross-ideological endorsements | Opp-party owned issues | Vague positions | Party-congruent positions |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) |
| **Model Type** | Neg. Bin. | Neg. Bin. | Neg. Bin. | OLS | OLS | OLS | OLS |
| (Intercept) | $0.85^*$ | $-2.14^*$ | $-0.42$ | $-0.07$ | $0.32^*$ | $0.24^*$ | $0.58^*$ |
| | $(0.25)$ | $(0.63)$ | $(0.58)$ | $(0.04)$ | $(0.06)$ | $(0.09)$ | $(0.07)$ |
| One-Party Contest | $0.89^*$ | $3.25^*$ | $0.76$ | $0.46^*$ | $0.10$ | $0.24^*$ | $-0.07$ |
| | $(0.41)$ | $(0.91)$ | $(0.92)$ | $(0.06)$ | $(0.06)$ | $(0.08)$ | $(0.06)$ |
| Previous Competitiveness | $0.01$ | $0.05^*$ | $-0.01$ | $0.00$ | $0.00$ | $0.00$ | $0.00$ |
| | $(0.01)$ | $(0.01)$ | $(0.01)$ | $(0.00)$ | $(0.00)$ | $(0.00)$ | $(0.00)$ |
| 1-Party x Prev. Competitiveness | $-0.04^*$ | $-0.08^*$ | $-0.13^*$ | $-0.01^*$ | | | |
| | $(0.01)$ | $(0.03)$ | $(0.05)$ | $(0.00)$ | | | |
| District Ideology | $0.41$ | $0.80$ | $0.26$ | $0.15^*$ | $0.09$ | $0.08$ | $0.02$ |
| | $(0.27)$ | $(0.57)$ | $(0.62)$ | $(0.05)$ | $(0.07)$ | $(0.11)$ | $(0.08)$ |
| Democrat | $0.13$ | $0.57$ | $-0.79^*$ | $0.06^*$ | $-0.03$ | $0.10$ | $-0.53^*$ |
| | $(0.17)$ | $(0.36)$ | $(0.39)$ | $(0.03)$ | $(0.05)$ | $(0.07)$ | $(0.05)$ |
| # Same-Party Chall. | $-0.07$ | $-0.15$ | $0.05$ | $0.01$ | $-0.03$ | $0.02$ | $-0.02$ |
| | $(0.07)$ | $(0.14)$ | $(0.15)$ | $(0.01)$ | $(0.02)$ | $(0.03)$ | $(0.02)$ |
| Incumbent | $0.24$ | $0.07$ | $-0.79^*$ | $0.13^*$ | $0.05$ | $-0.01$ | $-0.04$ |
| | $(0.15)$ | $(0.32)$ | $(0.38)$ | $(0.02)$ | $(0.04)$ | $(0.06)$ | $(0.05)$ |
| Open Seat | $0.22$ | $0.53$ | $-0.24$ | $0.01$ | $0.09$ | $-0.03$ | $-0.03$ |
| | $(0.17)$ | $(0.36)$ | $(0.40)$ | $(0.03)$ | $(0.05)$ | $(0.07)$ | $(0.05)$ |
| Upper Chamber | $-0.05$ | $0.02$ | $0.28$ | $-0.00$ | $-0.09^*$ | $-0.06$ | $-0.02$ |
| | $(0.15)$ | $(0.32)$ | $(0.35)$ | $(0.03)$ | $(0.04)$ | $(0.06)$ | $(0.04)$ |
| California | $-0.54^*$ | $-0.68^*$ | $1.39^*$ | $0.02$ | $-0.04$ | $-0.04$ | $0.10^*$ |
| | $(0.12)$ | $(0.26)$ | $(0.29)$ | $(0.02)$ | $(0.03)$ | $(0.05)$ | $(0.04)$ |
| $N$ | 296 | 296 | 296 | 212 | 252 | 252 | 252 |
| $R^2$ | | | | 0.33 | 0.06 | 0.07 | 0.52 |
| adj. $R^2$ | | | | 0.30 | 0.03 | 0.03 | 0.50 |
| Resid. sd | | | | 0.13 | 0.26 | 0.37 | 0.28 |
| AIC | 1324.04 | 709.12 | 536.61 | | | | |
| BIC | 1501.17 | 886.26 | 713.75 | | | | |
| $\log L$ | $-614.02$ | $-306.56$ | $-220.31$ | | | | |

1. Standard errors in parentheses
2. $^*$ indicates significance at $p < 0.05$
3. $N$ varies because candidates that do not list endorsements or discuss issues are excluded from those models.
4. 10 candidates who are neither Democrats nor Republicans are omitted.
5. F-tests find that the interaction term *One-Party Contest* x *Previous Competitiveness* does not improve model fit for models 5, 6, and 7. The interaction term is omitted in those models for parsimony.

Using the `MatchIt` package in `R`, 31 of the 46 candidates in one-party contests are matched with 31 candidates in two-party contests. Here, the average treatment effect of running in a one-party contest for party affiliation mentions is significant and in the expected direction. Transforming the negative binomial regression output to predicted counts, the matching analysis predicts that candidates in one-party contests will mention their party affiliation 2.10 times and candidates in two-party contests will mention their party identity an average of 3.29 times. This combined sample of 62 observations is also used to measure the average treatment effect of running in a one-party contest for the next two dependent variables

*Table 8:* Effect of one-party contest for each DV, propensity score matched samples

| **Dep. Variable** | Party ID mentions | Bipartisan statements | Ideological statements | Cross-ideological endorsements | Opp-party owned issues | Vague positions | Party-congruent positions |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) |
| **Model Type** | Neg. Bin. | Neg. Bin. | Neg. Bin. | OLS | OLS | OLS | OLS |
| (Intercept) | $1.19^*$ | $-0.15$ | $-0.34^*$ | $0.06^*$ | $0.35^*$ | $0.33^*$ | $0.39^*$ |
| | (0.07) | (0.14) | (0.16) | (0.01) | (0.02) | (0.03) | (0.03) |
| One-Party Contest | $-0.46^*$ | 0.33 | $-0.92^*$ | $0.15^*$ | 0.00 | $0.22^*$ | $-0.22^*$ |
| | (0.18) | (0.35) | (0.47) | (0.03) | (0.05) | (0.06) | (0.07) |
| $N$ | 62 | 62 | 62 | 56 | 48 | 48 | 48 |
| $R^2$ | | | | 0.13 | 0.00 | 0.04 | 0.04 |
| adj. $R^2$ | | | | 0.13 | 0.00 | 0.04 | 0.04 |
| Resid. sd | | | | 0.15 | 0.27 | 0.37 | 0.38 |
| AIC | 1344.59 | 720.37 | 576.07 | | | | |
| BIC | 1388.88 | 764.65 | 620.35 | | | | |
| $\log L$ | $-660.30$ | $-348.18$ | $-276.03$ | | | | |

1. Standard errors in parentheses
2. $^*$ indicates significance at $p < 0.05$
3. $N$ varies because candidates that do not list endorsements or discuss issues are excluded from those models, affecting the number of candidates in 1-party contests matched with candidates in 2-party contests. There were 46 total candidates in 1-party contests in the full dataset.

*Bipartisan statements*: The second column in Table 7 presents negative binomial regression results when the dependent variable is the count of bipartisan statements made across each website. I expected candidates in one-party contests to make more bipartisan statements than those in two-party contests. Results are significant and consistent with this expectation, predicting that candidates in one-party contests will make 1.13 bipartisan statements and those in two-party contests will make 0.61, all else equal.

Using propensity score matching with the same 62 matched observations, the average treatment effect of running in a one-party contest for the count of bipartisan statements is in

the expected direction, but not significant. Transforming to predicted counts, results of the matching analysis predict that candidates in one-party contests will make 1.20 bipartisan statements, and those in two-party contests will make 0.86 bipartisan statements.

*Ideological statements*: The third column in Table 7 presents negative binomial regression results when the dependent variable is the count of clear ideological statements. I expected that candidates in one-party contests would make fewer clear ideological statements than those in two-party contests. Consistent with this hypothesis, results predict that candidates in one-party contests will make 0.02 ideological statements while those in two-party contests will make 0.47 ideological statements, all else equal. These results do not meet the conventional threshold of statistical significance.

With matching, however, results for ideological statements are significant and in the expected direction. Transforming negative binomial regression results into expected counts, candidates in one-party contests are predicted to make 0.31 ideological statements, while candidates in two-party contests are predicted to make 0.72 ideological statements.

*Endorsements*: A total of 212 candidates listed endorsements on their websites: 41 in one-party contests and 171 in two-party contests. The fourth column in Table 7 presents OLS regression results when the dependent variable is the proportion of ideological endorsements that come from groups that typically support the opposite party. I expected that candidates in one-party contests would list a greater proportion of ideological endorsements from such groups than would candidates in two-party contests. In support of this hypothesis, results predict that 18 percent of ideological endorsements will be from groups that typically support the opposite party for candidates in one-party contests. Meanwhile, only 4.8 percent of ideological endorsements are predicted to be from such groups in two-party contests. This finding is statistically significant and in the expected direction.

Propensity score matching supports these findings, which are again significant. Of the 41 candidates in one-party contests who listed endorsements, 28 were matched with 28 in two-party contests. The average treatment effect of running in a one-party contest is an increase from 5.9 percent to 20.4 percent of ideological endorsements from across the aisle.

*Issue ownership*: A total of 252 Democrats and Republicans discussed policy issues

on their websites: 41 in one-party contests and 211 in two-party contests. The fifth column of Table 7 presents OLS regression results when the dependent variable is the proportion of issues that are owned by the opposite party. I expected that candidates in one-party contests would seek to broaden their appeal by discussing a greater proportion of issues owned by the opposite party than those in two-party contests. Consistent with this hypothesis, results predict that 43.2 percent of issues will meet this criterion for candidates in one-party contests, compared with 33.1 percent of issues for candidates in two-party contests. This difference is in the expected direction and significant at the .10 level.

With matching, 24 of the 41 candidates in one-party contests were matched with 24 in two-party contests. Here, the average treatment effect of running in a one-party contest is not statistically significantly different from zero for the proportion of issues that are owned by the opposite party. This sample of 48 matched observations was also used for the subsequent two issues-based dependent variables.

*Vague positions*: The sixth column of Table 7 presents OLS regression results when the dependent variable is the proportion of all issue positions in which the candidate takes a vague or nondirectional position. Issue positions were coded to indicate whether the position was vague, in agreement with the candidate's party, or in agreement with the opposite party. I expected that a greater proportion of issue positions would be vague or nondirectional in one-party contests than in two-party contests. Results predict that candidates in one-party contests will indicate vague or nondirectional positions for 55.8 percent of issues, compared with 32.4 percent of issues for candidates in two-party contests. This finding is significant and consistent with expectations.

Results from propensity score matching support these findings and are statistically significant. With matching, the average treatment effect is an increase of 0.22 in the proportion of issues in which a vague position is offered. Here, candidates in one-party contests are expected to give a vague position on 54.3 percent of issues, while those in two-party contests are expected to give a vague position on 32.7 percent of issues.

*Party-congruent positions*: The seventh column of Table 7 presents OLS regression results when the dependent variable is the proportion of all issue positions in which the

candidate states a position in agreement with her own party. I expected that candidates in one-party contests would have fewer party-congruent positions than those in two-party contests. Results predict that 29.5 percent of issues positions will be party-congruent for candidates in one-party contests, compared with 36.6 percent for those in two-party contests. These estimates are in the expected direction but are not statistically significant.

Results for party-congruent positions are statistically significant with matching. The average treatment effect for running in a one-party contest is a 0.219 decrease in the proportion of issue positions that agree with the candidate's party. With matching, candidates in one-party contests are expected agree with their party on 17 percent of issues, while those in two-party contests are predicted to agree with their party on 39 percent of issues.

**Discussion**

Evaluating candidate rhetoric is important because campaign promises are meaningful signals of future legislative efforts (Sulkin and Swigger 2008). Even subtle behavioral changes detected in this study should offer meaningful implications for policymaking efforts, as even vague appeals carry predictive power for legislative behavior (Sulkin 2009). While future work should evaluate the degree to which the differences observed in this study do translate to substantive behavioral changes in the policymaking process, prior research provides strong evidence to suspect that it should. Beyond candidate rhetoric, however, the large shift in endorsements from across ideological lines should predict the forging of new coalitions in the policymaking process that might otherwise not have existed.

One contribution of this study is that it reshapes conventional wisdom about candidates behavior in response to same-party challengers. In traditional primaries, the presence of a same-party challenger forces incumbents to cater to the extreme wing of their party or risk defeat. When the only real contest occurs in the primary stage, such candidates lack incentive to converge back to the center. In this paper, I find evidence that facing an opponent of the same party in the general election has the opposite effect. Even in districts that overwhelmingly favor one party, top-two primary rules invoke moderation into candidate rhetoric in one-party contests. Despite the fact that one study found a notable increase in voter information-seeking in one-party contests (Sinclair and Wray 2015), perhaps voters were

unable to make policy-based distinctions between same-party candidates (Ahler et al. 2016) because candidates intentionally make their positions less clear. Fewer party mentions, more bipartisan language, endorsements from a broader range of groups, and less clarity about issue positions may all limit the ability for voters to distinguish their two options.

Another contribution of this study is that it reshapes the meaning of "safe" districts in top-two primary states. With only about 15% of the nation's legislative contests within a margin of 10 percentage points, the outcome of most contests is a foregone conclusion that is decided long before Election Day. When candidates can simply rely on party-based voting to win, there is little reason to regard voters outside the party base as more than an afterthought. In this study, I find evidence that candidates in one-party contests appeal to a broader range of their constituencies. If the top-two primary encourages candidates in "safe" districts to be more responsive to voters outside the party base, then this should be evidence that reformers were successful in their goal of providing more accurate representation for the mass public.

Finally, this study demonstrates potential for the top-two primary to soften the tone of hyperpolarization. As heightened incivility at the elite level feeds into incivility among the mass public (Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Miller and Conover 2015), the current state of discourse in American politics may be troubling to some observers. If the top-two primary invokes moderation and bipartisanship into candidate rhetoric, it may likewise ease symptoms of affective polarization among the citizenry, at least at the margins. California, Louisiana, and Washington are home to approximately one out of six voters in the United States. In an average year, about 15 percent of contests across these states feature two candidates from the same party in the general election. While it is important not to overstate the possible effects here, reformers who have worked to gain support for implementing the system in other states may be emboldened by these findings.

## CHAPTER 4: UNCERTAINTY, COMPETITION, AND CANDIDATE STRATEGY

In 2016 and 2018, both of California's U.S. Senate contests featured two Democrats in the general election. These same-party pairings were produced by California's top-two primary system whereby, regardless of party, all candidates compete in an open blanket primary; the first and second-place finishers then proceed to a runoff in the general election. In part, reformers in California and Washington adopted the top-two primary in hopes that same-party general election contests would encourage candidates to appeal to all voters, not just their extreme primary electorates. They also anticipated that one-party contests under the new system would stimulate choice and competition in districts that strongly favor one party (Pildes 2011). Were reformers right? Herein, I address that question by investigating candidate strategy and competitive dynamics through in-depth interviews with state legislative candidates during the 2016 election cycle.

In the 2016 race for California's U.S. Senate seat, the top-two primary field of 34 Democratic and Republican candidates produced a general election pairing of two Democrats: Kamala Harris and Loretta Sanchez. What strategy would each adopt facing a challenger from her own party? In making strategic calculations, both candidates would necessarily first consider the deep-blue hue of California politics. That fall, Hillary Clinton was well on her way to trouncing Donald Trump by a 2-to-1 margin in the state—hardly surprising given that California has not supported a Republican for president or the U.S. Senate since 1988. And despite a bipartisan redistricting commission, Democrats held supermajority status in both of California's legislative chambers and control of most of the state's U.S. House seats.

Given the strong pull of the Democratic party in California politics, both Harris and Sanchez might have adopted a proven strategy of establishing the strongest possible progressive credentials. In recent years, playing to a party's extreme wing has been a strategy that members of Congress have used to survive intra-party challenges at the primary stage (Boatright 2013). In 2016, Senator McCain adopted this strategy by silencing his criticism of

then-candidate Donald Trump in the face of a strong challenge by Tea Party favorite Kelli ward, who pejoratively labeled McCain as the "champion of compromise" (Kane 2016). Conversely, those who have not responded to the extremes of their party have done so at their own peril. Senator Richard Lugar and House Majority Leader Eric Cantor are prominent examples of moderates who lost to primary challengers by failing to mollify extreme base voters. Likewise, thirteen House incumbents lost re-election in 2016; nearly half were ousted from within their own parties— "primaried out" for being too moderate.

But in California's 2016 Senate election, the two Democrats did not try to out-flank each other on the left. Sanchez labeled herself a blue-dog Democrat and was endorsed by the conservative *National Review* for her position on gun rights. Harris branded herself as the candidate that could "unite California with one voice," frequently mentioned her admiration of Republican Senator Rand Paul, and artfully avoided taking a clear position on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (Wire 2016). Anecdotally, this example illustrates how facing a same-party opponent in the *general* election encouraged both Sanchez and Harris to depart from the extremist positions that we might expect from candidates running for a seat with a constituency that strongly favors one party.

In this paper, I investigate how the campaign dynamics observed in the contest between Harris and Sanchez extend more broadly to state legislative elections, which are the most common context where same-party contests occur under the top-two primary. Nationwide, most state legislative districts are drawn with a partisan balance that favors one party or the other and state legislative elections are rarely competitive. As I will show, however, running against a same-party opponent in the general election fundamentally changes the pressures that candidates face. I conduct interviews with state legislative candidates to understand how strategy and competition are conditioned by the presence of same-party or opposite-party general election opponents. Collectively, interviews reveal that the party of one's opponent powerfully shapes the methods and intensity with which candidates campaign. Specifically, candidates reveal that weak electoral competition in two-party contests encourages them to remain at the ideological extremes, discourages voter outreach, and narrows the coalition of organized interests with whom candidates work. In

contrast, facing an opponent of the same party encourages candidates to broaden the range of voters to whom they appeal, even in districts with a partisan balance that strongly favors one party. Second, candidates in same-party contests actively target voters from the opposite party through their position-taking and voter contact. Finally, interviews reveal that candidates in same-party contests forge working relationships with organized interests beyond their typical partisan coalition.

**Median voter theorem in the state legislative context**

Decades ago, Downs (1957) theorized that rational candidates should maximize their electoral prospects by diverging to the ideological extremes for the primary stage and converging to the median voter for the general election. It is widely established that candidates do diverge for the primary stage (Brady et al. 2007; Fiorina 1974; Huntington 1950; Polsby 1980). But there is no consensus about candidate behavior in modern-day general elections. Some find that candidates do converge in presidential (Acree et al. 2018), gubernatorial, and U.S. Senate elections (Banda and Carsey 2015). Still, others find that candidates do not converge in either state legislative (Frendreis et al. 2003) or U.S. House contests (Burden 2004). What explains these mixed results?

A lack of competitiveness is a key factor distinguishing U.S. House and state legislative elections from presidential and statewide contests. Only 15% of the 7,383 legislative seats in the US are decided by fewer than 10 percentage points; worse still, only 30% are decided by fewer than 20 percentage points (Carsey et al. 2008). And between 2003 and 2014, one-third of state legislative seats had absolutely no competition at all because there was only one candidate on the ballot. Exacerbating the effects of this lack of competition is a stark imbalance in candidate fundraising. Only 18% of state legislative contests in the US were monetarily competitive[44] in 2013-2014 (Holden 2016). This resource imbalance means that one candidate enjoys a strong advantage in the quality and intensity of advertising, voter outreach, and staff support in most contests.

Furthermore, a shortage of persuadable voters likewise contributes to the

[44]A contest is considered monetarily competitive if the candidate with fewer campaign funds raised at least half as much as their opponent.

uncompetitive nature of most legislative contests. While 40% of voters identify as politically independent, 85% of those independents behave as closet partisans by voting for the same party in every election (Smith 2016). This effect is greatest in low-information contests like state legislative elections, where voters are most likely to rely exclusively on party labels to guide vote choice (Schaffner and Streb 2002). Combined with the lopsided nature of most legislative elections, the outcome of most contests is a foregone conclusion. Candidates are nearly guaranteed to win or lose due to party labels alone.

Contrary to Downsian theory, the absence of electoral pressure for most legislative candidates means that they lack incentive to adjust their views towards the district median. When the outcome is decided long before Election Day, candidates have nothing to gain from attenuating their policy positions, but they do risk alienating local party activists, primary voters, and organized interests on which they rely for support (Burden 2004). Thus, it is unsurprising that studies of candidate behavior do not find evidence of convergence in legislative and congressional elections.

The top-two primary changes this strategic calculus because of the uncertainty created by same-party general election contests. First, district lines no longer dictate which candidate will win based on party alone. Whereas a heavily-Democratic district will reliably elect the Democratic candidate in a two-party contest, the outcome is far less predictable when both candidates are Democrats. This is because the absence of party-based voting means that candidates do not know for whom Democrats and Republicans will vote. For example, if both candidates are Democrats, some Democratic voters may prefer whichever candidate conveys the strongest commitment to Democratic values. Meanwhile, some Democrats will vote based on factors unrelated to policy preferences altogether (Adams et al. 2017). Furthermore, Republican voters now become relevant in this hypothetical heavily-Democratic district, and there is evidence that those Republican voters will support whichever Democrat they perceive to be more ideologically-proximate to the Republican Party (Fisk 2017). Combined, these elements invoke uncertainty and unpredictability in one-party contests.

The uncertainty that characterizes one-party contests should have several effects that produce an electoral dynamic of heightened competition. These effects should encourage

risk-averse strategies like those that we would expect in a closely-contested, two-party contest in a swing district. However, the uncertainty of one-party contests should mean that candidates perceive that there is a possibility that races will be closely-decided even if they ultimately are not. First, uncertainty should incentivize risk-averse behavior in which candidates appeal to a broader range of voters. It is well-established that candidates run scared at the slightest hint of electoral vulnerability (King 1997). When a same-party contest invokes uncertainty such that candidates can no longer rely on party-based voting to win, legislative candidates should face incentives to appeal to the district median. Just as members of Congress change their voting behaviors and policy agendas to adjust for changing constituencies after redistricting (Hayes, Hibbing, and Sulkin 2010; Overby and Cosgrove 1996), candidates in one-party contests should likewise modify their position-taking strategies to adjust for the wider range of the electorate to which they are accountable.

Second, candidates should adjust the methods and intensity with which they campaign. As strategic actors, there is strong evidence that candidates work hardest to mobilize voters when they believe that they are running in a competitive election (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993). To this end, candidates in same-party contests should employ active voter contact strategies that target voters across the spectrum. Even same-party contests that are won by wide margins on Election Day should invoke enough uncertainty to encourage candidates to engage in face-to-face campaigning.

Third, candidates should broaden the coalition of organized interests and party factions with whom they pursue alliances, endorsements, and support. It is well-established that endorsements convey meaningful signals to voters about candidates' policy preferences (McDermott 2006). Thus, risk-averse candidates seeking to broaden their appeal with voters should likewise adapt the manner in which they engage with organized interests.

To date, most studies on the electoral consequences of the top-two primary focus on voter behavior (e.g., Ahler et al. 2016) and legislative representation (e.g, McGhee and Shor 2017). However, one study of state legislative campaign websites found that candidates in one-party general elections are more likely to use bipartisan rhetoric, adopt vague issue positions, and less likely to mention their party affiliation on their campaign websites (Sparks

2019). The present study builds upon these findings by using interviews to provide an understanding of candidate motivations and strategies behind such behaviors.

In sum, when both general election candidates are from the same party, the competitive environment is changed such that we must re-evaluate conventional wisdoms of candidate strategy. We should expect that this new dynamic will affect the positions candidates take, the intensity with which they campaign, and the electoral coalitions that they build. In this way, the presence of a one-party contest should reconceptualize our understanding of candidate strategy in districts that are drawn to favor one party. As in-depth interviews with candidates will reveal, those running in Washington State's one-party contests adopt many behaviors that are signs of competition and vulnerability even when those candidates end up winning by large margins.

**Expectations**

*Targeting the median voter*: Candidates in one-party contests should actively target moderate and opposite-party voters with their platforms, campaign materials, and outreach strategies. Candidates in two-party contests should be unlikely to target voters beyond the party base due to a lack of electoral competition.

*Active voter contact strategies*: Facing a same-party opponent should encourage candidates to adopt strategies commensurate with a highly-competitive contest. Specifically, as compared to candidates in two-party contests, they should pursue vigorous voter contact strategies, including door-to-door canvassing, direct mail, and other contact strategies common to competitive races. In contrast, with the outcome nearly guaranteed, candidates in two-party contests in mostly safe districts should lack an incentive to employ such strategies.

*Involvement of organized interests*: Same-party contests should shape the role of organized interests in legislative elections in two ways. First, a desire to broaden their appeal should encourage candidates in same-party contests to form coalitions with organized interests that fall outside of their typical ideological and partisan coalitions. Second, the unpredictability of one-party contests may discourage the involvement of groups that would typically fall within those candidates' ideological coalition due to the potential repercussions of siding with the losing candidate.

**Data and methods**

Herein, I analyze in-depth interviews with state legislative candidates in Washington and North Carolina during the 2016 election cycle. Statistical relationships identified by prior research provide a good starting point for identifying how the top-two primary reshapes candidate behavior in legislative elections (Sparks 2019). The present study uses in-depth interviews to build upon that research. Over the course of a campaign, candidates are responding to many factors in their environments such that the causality behind observed behavior often remains in question. By speaking directly with the actors about whom scholars theorize, interviews can reveal the complex motivations and strategies that drive candidate behavior. In this way, interviews provide an opportunity to directly identify causal mechanisms in a manner that surveys and observational studies often cannot. Although interview-based research will, by nature, include a smaller sample than other methods, interviews provide richer data that can more directly and thoroughly uncover the attitudes and motivations of political actors (Mosley 2013).

Washington was chosen for two reasons. First, Washington's top-two system is well-established, implemented four years before California's. Second, candidate behavior in Washington's semi-professional legislature is more generalizable to other states than that of California's professionalized legislature, where state senators have districts more populous than U.S. House districts. In Washington, I interview most legislative candidates who ran in same-party general election contests in 2016. For comparison with candidates in two-party contests in a traditional primary system, North Carolina is chosen because it is a close match for Washington with respect to its semi-professionalized legislature. Legislative districts in Washington and North Carolina feature similar populations,[45] and legislative elections in both states are comparable in terms of their average campaign expenditures.[46] North Carolina uses a semi-closed primary system.

[45]Following the 2010 census and redistricting, the average legislator in North Carolina represents 112,182 constituents and the average legislator in Washington represents 137,236 constituents (U.S. Census Bureau).

[46]In 2014, the average North Carolina senate candidate spent $242,000 and the average house candidate spent $107,000. That same year, the average senate candidate in Washington spent $222,000 and the average house candidate spent $82,000 (Stepleton 2015)

The interview sample does not represent a true random sample. For Washington, I identified the population of 16 candidates running against same-party opponents. All 16 candidates were contacted by e-mail at their legislative, campaign, and/or personal e-mail accounts. Of these 16 candidates in Washington, 10 (62.5%) agreed to be interviewed. For North Carolina, I assembled a matched pool of candidates that reflected a balanced sample of partisanship, incumbency status, and urban/rural districts. In North Carolina, I also specifically targeted candidates in safe districts to generate a sample that provided a close comparison to the types of districts that feature one-party contests in Washington. In total, 23 candidates in North Carolina were invited to participate and 10 (43%) agreed to be interviewed. Table 9 lists general characteristics of each participant.

Washington and North Carolina differ in how they have recently conducted redistricting: Washington uses a bipartisan redistricting commission, while in North Carolina, a unified Republican state government has controlled recent redistricting. Nonetheless, the sample of districts in this study contains a mix of heavily-Democratic and heavily-Republican districts in both states–districts that one would conventionally consider "safe". To illustrate the lopsided nature of these districts, in the Washington sample of candidates, the mean district-level electoral margin between Clinton and Trump in the 2016 election was 31.2 percentage points, and the median margin was 18.6 percentage points. For candidates in the North Carolina sample, the mean margin between Clinton and Trump was 29.9 percentage points, with a median of 26.1 points. Thus, while both samples contain a mix of heavily-Democratic and Republican districts, those in North Carolina feature candidates in two-party contests and those in Washington feature one-party contests.

Overall, both samples represent a balance of rural, urban, and suburban districts. Further, both samples include candidates running as incumbents, challengers, and in open contests. Each sample also includes a balance of both Democrats and Republicans.

Interviews were conducted between October 1, 2016 and November 30, 2016. Most meetings were face-to-face, with a few conducted by telephone when necessitated by the candidate's schedule. On average, the interviews lasted around 37 minutes, and followed the same semi-structured format (Leech 2002) with the same ordering of questions. General

*Table 9:* Interview subjects

| Pseudonym | State | Incumbency Status | Candidate Party | Opponent Party | District result in 2016 presidential race | Interview Type |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A | NC | Incumbent | Dem. | Rep. | D+14 | In-person |
| B | NC | Incumbent | Dem. | Rep. | D+28 | Phone |
| C | NC | Incumbent | Dem. | Rep. | D+72 | In-person |
| D | NC | Incumbent | Dem. | Rep. | D+63 | In-person |
| E | NC | Incumbent | Rep. | Dem. | R+12 | In-person |
| F | NC | Open seat | Dem. | Rep. | D+26 | Phone |
| G | NC | Open seat | Rep. | Dem. | D+26 | Phone |
| H | NC | Challenger | Dem. | Rep. | R+5 | In-person |
| I | NC | Challenger | Rep. | Dem. | D+33 | In-person |
| J | NC | Challenger | Rep. | Dem. | D+18 | Phone |
| Q | WA | Incumbent | Dem. | Dem. | D+16 | Phone |
| R | WA | Incumbent | Rep. | Rep. | R+22 | Phone |
| S | WA | Open seat | Dem. | Dem. | D+83 | Phone |
| T | WA | Open seat | Dem. | Dem. | D+83 | Phone |
| U | WA | Open seat | Dem. | Dem. | D+16 | In-person |
| V | WA | Open seat | Rep. | Rep. | R+19 | In-person |
| W | WA | Open seat | Rep. | Rep. | R+19 | In-person |
| X | WA | Challenger | Dem. | Dem. | D+16 | In-person |
| Y | WA | Challenger | Rep. | Rep. | R+15 | In-person |
| Z | WA | Challenger | Rep. | Rep. | R+22 | In-person |

topics included: (1) ideology and position taking, (2) outreach strategies and methods, and (3) fundraising strategies and participation by interest groups and party organizations.

To elaborate, each interview began with a general explanation that I was seeking to learn about candidate strategy in legislative elections. Following assurances of anonymity, the first questions were about the candidates' presentation of self, including how they ideologically positioned themselves relative to their opponents, the issues that they discussed on their campaigns, and the demographics of voters that they targeted with their messaging and position-taking. Next, candidates were asked about outreach strategies, including the types of voter contact and advertising they employed. Finally, interviews moved to questions about the ways in which parties and interest groups were involved with their contests.

**Discussion**

In the following analyses, I address findings for each of the expectations separately by first discussing candidates in two-party contests in North Carolina, followed by candidates in Washington's one-party contests.

**Targeting the median voter in North Carolina's two-party contests**

All five incumbents in North Carolina's two-party contests perceived that their elections were a foregone conclusion—knowing the nature of their districts made it likely that they would win any contest by default. Thus, in conversations with all of them, a recurring theme was their belief that their responsibility was to be a vocal champion for their party's agenda. In this spirit, these incumbents explained that they made no efforts whatsoever to court moderate voters or broaden the appeal of their platform to those beyond the party base. As one candidate explained:

> *Candidate E* (Incumbent, Republican)
>
> > I was first elected in 2010 when the GOP took back the state senate. In 2012, I had a Libertarian opponent. In 2014, I was unopposed. This year, I have my first Democratic challenger, but he doesn't have the funding or footing to make a real run at my seat. My job this year is more of an advocate or cheerleader for our record as Republicans in the legislature.

In three other cases, incumbents represented districts that were competitive prior to the 2010 redistricting, but their districts were no longer competitive after that point. All of these candidates spoke directly either to how the re-drawing of their district lines had a direct effect on their ideological positioning, the rhetoric they used, or the types of issues they emphasized in their campaigns. Thus, while redistricting did not change the actual legislators who held particular seats, it did change how those very same legislators campaigned and governed. Like the quote above, these incumbents talked about using their position to act as a champion for the party base rather than appealing to their broader constituency:

> *Candidate A* (Incumbent, Democrat)
>
> > This year, any messaging I use is about turning out the base. I see my position as one that gives me a responsibility to stand up and be a leader on progressive issues. Back when this district was competitive, my messaging strongly appealed to rural voters on issues that matter to them, but not issues that Democrats talk about much.
>
> *Candidate B* (Incumbent, Democrat)
>
> > My first campaign was in 2004. This was a swing district then, and I was running against a moderate incumbent. There was a fight for the middle ground. He was one of a very small number of Republicans who refused to sign anti-gay legislation, so he got endorsed by a lot of groups on the left. It really was a fight for who had the best moderate credentials. Today, my positions haven't changed, but the way that I talk about them has changed. I can talk about HB2 from an equality and justice standpoint, but in my old district I'd oppose it from an economic perspective.

Just as incumbents in safe two-party contests spoke about how the uncompetitive nature of their seats meant that that their role was to speak to the views of their primary voters

rather than their broader constituency, candidates in open seat two-party contests described those same pressures. The following two candidates ran against each other for the same open seat. As these quotes illustrate, these two open-seat candidates saw their contests as a foregone conclusion, which shaped their position-taking strategies.

*Candidate F* (Open seat, Democrat)

> The language I used was poll-tested to resonate with progressives. The social issues I advocated might appear to be more controversial, or they might seem like issues to avoid in a general election. But, my district is 67% Democratic, so that's really what made sense.

*Candidate G* (Open seat, Republican)

> Due to the nature of this district, I had no illusions that it would be a close race. I knew I wouldn't have a chance unless my opponent got caught doing something terrible, but I did want to give voters a choice and speak up on some issues that are important to me. I succeeded with both of those goals. I really went out to say what I was going to say without worrying much about how voters would perceive me. Even with a million dollars I don't think I could have moved the needle much. If we were a district that was a D+3 instead of D+14, I might have considered attenuating some positions, but I don't think it would have helped me under the circumstances.

Likewise, challengers for other seats from both parties acknowledged that their respective contests were foregone conclusions. In the same spirit as incumbents and open-seat candidates, North Carolina challengers used their candidacy to advocate their party platforms and provide a distinct choice rather than converging towards the center, as Downsian theory predicts they ought to have done. As the following quotes illustrate, two out of the three challengers interviewed in North Carolina expressed these sentiments.

*Candidate I* (Challenger, Republican)

> I've run for this seat for years now, and I'll continue to run until somebody else stands up. I don't like seeing someone run unopposed. I see it as my responsibility to fill that role, so I'm here to provide an alternative.

*Candidate J* (Challenger, Republican)

> There was a 33,000 vote margin between the winner and loser in 2014, so I initially set out to flip half of those votes. With Donald Trump becoming the nominee in May, that strategy fell apart. I realized with Trump on the ballot, with white supremacists and Nazis holding press conferences, I had no shot in hell. The first question everyone asked me was how I felt about Trump, and I knew I was screwed. I spent the rest of the election being honest with voters, speaking my mind, and understanding that I wouldn't have a chance.

### Targeting the median voter in Washington's one-party contests

In contrast with North Carolina candidates, those interviewed in Washington's one-party contests perceived their races as highly competitive. This was true even when the

outcome on Election Day was decided by margins of 30 percentage points or more. Although many of these contests were ultimately decided by a landslide, all of these candidates expressed uncertainty about what would happen. This uncertainty is illustrated best by a contest in which the incumbent defeated her same-party challenger by a 3-to-1 margin. Here, the state party chair threatened to use party funds to fight off the challenger, despite the fact that that challenger raised and spent zero funds and that the incumbent enjoyed a substantially larger victory than in any previous election against an opposite-party opponent. As the challenger explained,

*Candidate X* (Challenger, Democrat)

> The state party chair actually called to ask me to withdraw from the race. He said they wanted to spend the money against Republicans instead of against me. He ended up hanging up on me.

This reaction is consistent with Anthony King's (1997) argument that even slight electoral vulnerability leads to risk-averse behavior. In contrast to the candidates in North Carolina, all those in Washington engaged in some form of risk-averse behavior to broaden their appeal to voters. For some, this entailed adopting a platform that appealed to the median voter. This is illustrated by both of the following candidates, who positioned themselves toward the middle and won by wide margins despite their concerns:

*Candidate V* (Open seat, Republican)

> Throughout the primary and general, I've provided a clear approach. I'm a moderate. People have asked me why I'm not running as an independent or a Democrat, based on my moderate views. It's a game – I hate to say it, but it is. I'd love to run in a nonpartisan election. As a political science major, I know that I can't run as an independent because I know that I can't win under those conditions in this district. I just can't.

*Candidate T* (Open seat, Democrat)

> From the beginning, I had to think about how to distinguish myself from the 5 other Democrats. I watched to see how the others would be staking out our space. We have a socialist on the Seattle City Council and a few people strongly encouraged me to run as a socialist in this district. There is an interesting political conversation going on here where some Bernie voters are trying to move the party to the left and others are moving outside the party. I ultimately staked out a position as a progressive Democrat, which is a position that I think aligns with the average voter in this district.

For others, this risk-averse strategy involved actively targeting voters from the opposite party. This tactic was only mentioned by one candidate in North Carolina, but was echoed in various ways by eight out of the ten candidates running in Washington's one-party contests. The second and third quote, below, are from two candidates who ran against each

other for the same seat. In this pair of quotes, Candidate T corroborates the account offered by Candidate S.

*Candidate Z* (Challenger, Republican)

> My strategy is to target everybody to the left of the Tea Party. I hope I can get the Dems, the independents, and half of the Republicans.

*Candidate S and Candidate T, below, were opponents that ran for the same seat:*

*Candidate S* (Open seat, Democrat)

> We definitely included the 20% of the district that's Republican in our calculus, and we definitely did what we could to earn that vote. It's a liberal district, but we also tried to avoid antagonizing those on the right.

*Candidate T* (Open seat, Democrat)

> On the issues, we were pretty close to the same. My opponent worked hard to say that he was the reasonable person in the room, and that he understood that we could have progressive values, but in order to pass policy we need to compromise to build coalitions with the opposition.

Other Washington candidates tried to broaden their appeal by being mindful in how they crafted their campaign materials. As the following statements demonstrate, they made a deliberate effort to attract voters beyond their respective party bases, a strategy that was only used by one candidate in North Carolina.

*Candidate Z* (Challenger, Republican)

> My website and voter guide statements are very carefully designed to appeal to a lot of different groups. You'll also notice my signs have a very tiny R on them. That's intentional.

*Candidate Y* (Challenger, Republican)

> I'm running as an "Independent GOP" because I thought that label would appeal to independents and disgruntled voters. My opponent doesn't even put his party on his signs.

*Candidate U* (Open seat, Democrat)

> On my website, I wanted to use messaging that would demonstrate my willingness to represent everyone.

In sum, candidates in both states competed in districts that favored one party, however, their comments revealed a stark contrast in how they evaluated the nature of their contests. In North Carolina, the understanding that contests were a foregone conclusion left candidates seeing no reason to soften their positions or to appeal to voters beyond their respective bases. In Washington, contests featured two general election opponents from the same party, which presented candidates with a sharply contrasting set of incentives. In Washington's one-party

contests, candidates worked to position themselves so as to broaden their appeal and invite voters from across the ideological spectrum. Candidates in same-party contests spoke of this strategy as being driven by the absence of meaningful party cues to differentiate themselves from their opponents, thus creating uncertainty as to which candidate voters would support.

**Active voter contact strategies in North Carolina's two-party contests**

When candidates with opposite-party opponents in North Carolina viewed their contests as a foregone conclusion, this likely affected their campaign activities. Nine of 10 candidates interviewed in North Carolina felt certain about the outcome of the general election, and also described minimal outreach strategies. For incumbents, this often included low-cost, low-effort tools to keep their name in the public eye, but no aggressive strategy of retail politics; none engaged in face-to-face voter contact that one might expect in down-ballot contests. As several incumbents describe:

*Candidate E* (Incumbent, Republican)

> I've done 2 direct mailers, a very small print newspaper ad, and some online ads, but I don't do a lot of active campaigning aside from that.

*Candidate B* (Incumbent, Democrat)

> This cycle, I'm so safe from gerrymandering that whoever has a D next to their name will win no matter what. I haven't done a lick of work for my own campaign at all this year. My last tough race in 2010. I talked to voters every day for the 84 days prior to the election. Since 2010, you know how many doors I've knocked on? Zero. And I know that's bad for democracy. Instead, I spend most of my time on conference calls with other campaigns around the state.

*Candidate D* (Incumbent, Democrat)

> I've never drawn a serious opponent. I canvass smart, not hard. I do make sure to knock on the door of the neighborhood association presidents. Besides that, I pay people to do literature drops during the day.

*Candidate C* (Incumbent, Democrat)

> I always say we campaign all the time. I go to nonprofit meetings, government meetings, university stuff. I stay active in the community in various issue areas, but not so much by door knocking or anything like that.

*Candidate A* (Incumbent, Democrat)

> This year, my contest is such that I don't even have to actively try to win.

This same trend also emerged among challengers and open-seat candidates. Knowing the realities of their districts, three out of five candidates in these categories did not engage in face-to-face campaigning because they viewed it as a poor use of their time.

*Candidate G* (Open seat, Republican)

> To be real honest, it was mostly a virtual campaign. Due to the nature of the whole thing and running a business also, door knocking would not be worth my time.

*Candidate J* (Challenger, Republican)

> Most of my time campaigning is spent on social media, I don't do any door-to-door at all. I went viral for talking about one of my court cases in February, so I have 10,000 followers on Twitter. In terms of my hours spent, I get a much better return on my investment by tweeting.

*Candidate F* (Open seat, Democrat)

> This is a 67% Democratic district. I personally knocked on 7,000 doors in the primary and my campaign staff did 40,000. After the primary, we did none of that. Once I won the primary, I pretty much assumed there was a very, very, very strong likelihood that I would win [the general election]. This is a part-time legislature, and I have a job. On top of that, I'm expected to give $250,000 to the caucus so that they can pass it forward to a few close races. That means there's just no time for voter engagement.

## Active voter contact strategies in Washington's one-party contests

In Washington, candidates in same-party contests engaged in full-scale voter outreach activities, with 9 of 10 going door-to-door to canvass voters several times per week. Although nearly every candidate interviewed pursued an intensive strategy of retail politics, almost none were in contests that were ultimately electorally competitive; 8 of 10 were in races decided by more than 15 percentage points on Election Day. Instead of actual competition, what mattered most in determining outreach strategies was having an opponent from the same party, which meant outcomes were no longer simply a product of party-line voting. Consequently, the uncertainty and risk involved was inherently greater, resulting in a more intensive strategy, as these candidates described:

*Candidate W* (Open seat, Republican)

> I've knocked on 4,000 doors and my staff knocked on another 4,000. I contact anybody who has voted twice in the last 4 elections.

*Candidate Q* (Incumbent, Democrat)

> When I go out canvassing, I ask for lists to include voters that I would not normally talk to, namely Republicans. When I approach them, I'm mostly asking for them to tell me about their own priorities.

*Candidate U* (Open seat, Democrat)

> I went to every single precinct in the primary and talked only to primary voters. I'm walking every precinct again in the general and talking to everybody. When I go to doors, I go to every single registered voter. When I talk to Republicans at the door, most people really just want to know that you know what you're doing and that you're willing to listen.

*Candidate Y* (Challenger, Republican)

> When I doorbell, I knock on every single door, because the issues I'm speaking about are ones that appeal to everybody: being responsible with your tax money. Everybody pays taxes and everyone wants [tax dollars] used wisely.

Beyond canvassing, candidates identified other ways in which they actively engaged in voter outreach. Every candidate in Washington did so in some form, with 9 of 10 candidates actively working to reach voters outside of their own party.

*Candidate V* (Open seat, Republican)

> The geographic area of my district is one of the largest in the state, so it's logistically unrealistic for me to be doorbelling. I do have a strong social media presence, though. I respond to every comment and post, even when negative, because I believe that candidates should be responsive and available to all voters.

*Candidate S* (Open seat, Democrat)

> There were a lot of people we identified while knocking doors that are soft Rs who will vote for a Democrat and not just skip this race, and we did want to go for that vote. It's not a big enough segment to do a targeted mailer because its cost prohibitive, but we did target them with Facebook ads that played up the endorsements that would be of most interest to those folks.

*Candidate U* (Open seat, Democrat)

> When I send out mail pieces, I do one for Democrats and another for independents and Republicans.

Only one candidate in Washington made no efforts to court voters beyond the party base. However, in the interview, this candidate paused thoughtfully and reflected aloud as to whether that was the best decision. This candidate lost by a substantial margin.

*Candidate W* (Open seat, Republican)

> I haven't reached out to Democratic voters [long pause]... but I probably should have. I have not reached out to the liberal side of the spectrum. I figured they wouldn't vote for either one of us.

In sum, most candidates in North Carolina's two-party contests viewed their election outcomes as highly predictable. It was not surprising, therefore, that most engaged in only minimal voter outreach, and almost none of them campaigned door-to-door to speak with voters and ask for their support. In contrast, candidates in Washington faced greater uncertainty in their one-party contests. Their campaign strategies were also a reasonable response to their environment: candidates made greater efforts to reach voters—notably including those from the opposite party—through door-to-door campaigning and other means.

**Involvement of organized interests in North Carolina's two-party contests**

In North Carolina's two-party contests, candidates indicated that ideological-based interest groups stayed within their traditional party coalitions. Specifically, 6 of 10 candidates had almost no contact with groups or stake-holders beyond their traditional party coalition. Only two candidates sought endorsements from groups outside their party coalition, but those groups all endorsed their opponents. Overall, the interviews revealed that endorsements, dialogue, and working relationships across ideological lines were rare, as these candidates illustrate:

*Candidate C* (NC, incumbent, Democrat)

> I don't have much contact people who are right of center. I almost never get lobbied by groups on that side, either. Mostly I hear from Democrats who want me to be more liberal.

*Candidate I* (Challenger, Republican)

> I'm on the endorsement board of our local NEA chapter. I'm a lifelong teacher and my opponent has no experience in education at all. The board endorsed my opponent, which was really embarrassing. They just have no interest in supporting Republicans [like myself].

*Candidate B* (Incumbent, Democrat)

> Conservative-leaning groups don't cross over for me anymore because my [legislative voting] record is too long.

**Involvement of organized interests in Washington's one-party contests**

In Washington, candidates running in one-party contests exhibited a different pattern of behavior towards organized interests. Specifically, 7 of 10 candidates in Washington reported reaching out to groups and organized interests beyond their traditional party coalitions. For some, these efforts included forming alliances with organized centrist factions within their parties, as illustrated by the first two candidates below; both won their seats by landslide margins. The third candidate quoted actively contacted local chapters of the opposite party for support.

*Candidate V* (Open seat, Republican)

> I'm endorsed by the "Mainstream Republicans" – a moderate group in the state. They even asked me whether I wanted the endorsement public, because it can hurt in a conservative district. I told them I am proud and happy to have their endorsement. I am not shying away from my moderate positions.

*Candidate T* (Open seat, Democrat)

> I did a ton of outreach to the established political donor groups in the district. They're basically all Democrats, but they're more moderate business owners who are concerned with the influence of

> organized labor at the local level. My fundraising consultant was able to get contact information for those circles, so I was able to reach out to wealthier, older, more conservative donors. I heard a lot of people saying they were voting for me because of that outreach.

*Candidate Z* (Open seat, Republican)

> I reached out to the local Clinton and Sanders organizations in town and have been endorsed by leaders of both groups. I spoke to the Benton County Democrats and had very warm and productive meetings with them. While I asked them not to endorse me, I did ask for their word-of-mouth support. The Dems told me that I can't run as a Democrat because I won't win, but they do want me to win.

The previous three quotes demonstrate how candidates saw these relationships as opportunities to broaden the range of voters to whom they could appeal by gaining support from groups, factions, or organizations that are not within their party base. In another example, the following quote demonstrates how one Democrat in a liberal district used the conservative signal conveyed by a newspaper endorsement to seek the support of voters from beyond that candidate's party base.

*Candidate S* (Open seat, Democrat)

> The endorsement that was the most meaningful for me was the *Seattle Times*, since it's regarded as pretty center and conservative by my district's standards. We really played up that endorsement. It was very focused on me as someone who will dive deeply into the issues and work across the aisle, so that endorsement played well with that demographic.

With respect to organized interests, 7 of 10 candidates made direct overtures to groups that reliably support the opposite party. As the following quotes show, these efforts were met with both success and failure. In the final quote below, the interest group initiated the relationship by sending an unsolicited donation to the candidate.

*Candidate Z* (Challenger, Republican)

> The head of Local 598 told me that [my opponent] hadn't called them once in his 8 years in office. This fall, he said "[Your opponent] called me... He's been desperate to meet and asked for our endorsement." The [teachers' union] president said the same thing this year. It's like a different guy showed up. I've heard he's also calling superintendents and educators.

*Candidate V* (Open seat, Republican)

> On the left, I have prominent local Democrats supporting me. I'm proud of that, because it shows I'm committed to working together to get things done. Unions have approached me, too. I've tried for those endorsements but have not received any yet. It's a fine line. I've made it clear that my door will always be open and I will always listen, even if we don't always agree.

*Candidate Z* (Challenger, Republican)

> Non-ideological PACs are mostly staying out of the race. Teachers endorsed me, and the Washignton Education Association is working on my behalf and has donated to me. Unions have endorsed me, too. The plumbers endorsed – they're the big union in town because of the power plant.

*Candidate V* (Open seat, Republican)

> The largest contributor to my campaign is a Democrat. We can't discuss the presidential race together, but she knows I'll legislate in a way that's inclusive of all.

*Candidate Q* (Incumbent, Democrat)

> I got a donation from one group that puzzled me: a pro-business group that I've never received from before. I didn't ask for the money, but I did take the check.

Taken together, these examples illustrate how different candidate contacts opened lines of communication that likely would not have existed otherwise. The greater implication of this behavior is its potential for shaping the policymaking process when legislators engage with a more diverse range of stakeholders.

At times, when ideological groups crossed over to support candidates from the opposite party, it complicated the relationship between candidates and groups within their typical party coalition. In this case, several conservative groups made endorsements in a contest between two Democrats.

*Candidate U* (Open seat, Democrat)

> Both of the Republican opponents from the primary, even the tea party guy, are supporting me. Other Republican groups, like the Building Industry of Washington and the Association of Washington Business have endorsed my opponent. In terms of labor, the state labor council endorsed me, but my opponent got the pipefitters and longshoremen. But, once they saw who the BIA and AWB supported, both unions rescinded their endorsements and the Young Democrats sent her a pretty angry letter.

Another dynamic that emerged was that many groups stayed neutral by either endorsing both candidates or neither one. By adopting this strategy, groups could minimize risk in the face of electoral uncertainty, maintaining a good relationship with both candidates. Of the 10 candidates with same-party opponents interviewed in Washington, four expressed that this had occurred in their races; all four ran in open-seat contests.

*Candidate S* (Open seat, Democrat)

> Many of the liberal groups sat out the primary but participated in the general election, pretty much everyone made an endorsement. At least a few did dual endorsements, including NARAL and Planned Parenthood.

*Candidate U* (Open seat, Democrat)

> A lot of unions stayed out entirely, and many dual-endorsed.

Candidates from both parties also indicated a lack of involvement by state party organizations. This was true for incumbents, challengers, and open-seat candidates. While it

is difficult to assess whether the refusal of parties to influence the outcome actually made the contest more competitive, it is clear that it gave these candidates the perception that it did. All 10 candidates in Washington stated that the state party organizations were not picking sides in their contests. In contrast, local party chapters took an ad hoc approach, endorsing in some contests but remaining impartial in others, even when an incumbent was on the ballot. As candidates explained:

*Candidate T* (Open seat, Democrat)

> The state party was pretty explicit from the beginning, saying that they don't get engaged in this district because it's a safe D district and they always have high-quality candidates. They said they would be pleased if I won, but that they aren't really going to do anything to help me. They did give me the basic information they share with all Democrats, but didn't show any favoritism.

*Candidate Q* (Incumbent, Democrat)

> In my race, party organizations didn't seem to have a process for how to deal with this circumstance. They'll likely figure out a process in the future. As the incumbent, the party seemed to want to avoid hurting anyone's feelings. It was awkward that the county and LD party organizations did not want to make an endorsement when I've been in office for so many years.

*Candidate S* (Open seat, Democrat)

> The state party and House Democratic Caucus both sat the contest out. The Speaker of the House is from my district, and he sat the contest out.

*Candidate U* (Open seat, Democrat)

> It's harder raising money because the party isn't formally helping. The caucus and Speaker support me in subtle ways behind the scenes, but they don't want to give money or do more public means of supporting me.

*Candidate R* (Incumbent, Republican)

> This is my first competitive race in 5 cycles. I raised more money than in previous years, but [the state party] didn't get involved.

In sum, one-party contests reshaped the relationships between candidates, organized interests, and party organizations in several important ways. Some candidates sought alliances with centrist factions within their own party, others sought alliances with the opposite party, and in all cases, state party organizations refused to formally endorse or support candidates in one party contests. Most candidates also actively sought the support of organized interests that typically support the opposite party, and at times, interest groups proactively crossed party lines to support candidates that they had not supported in the past. Collectively, candidates noted that these combined factors contributed to their perceptions that the outcome of their races were uncertain and competitive.

*Table 10:* Descriptive summary of interview responses

| Activity | North Carolina | Washington |
|---|---|---|
| Believed the contest was a foregone conclusion | 9 of 10 | 0 of 10 |
| Expressed uncertainty about the outcome of the election | 1 of 10 | 10 of 10 |
| *Targeting the median voter* | | |
| Targeted voters from the opposite party with messaging and position-taking | 1 of 10 | 8 of 10 |
| *Active voter contact strategies* | | |
| Engaged in door-to-door canvassing | 2 out of 10 | 9 out of 10 |
| Employed other forms of active voter contact to reach independent and opposite-party voters | 2 out of 10 | 9 out of 10 |
| *Involvement of organized interests* | | |
| Actively solicited endorsements and support from groups outside typical party coalition | 2 of 10 | 7 of 10 |
| Organized interests in partisan coalition either stayed neutral or endorsed both general election candidates | 0 of 10 | 4 of 10 |
| State party organization did not endorse a general election candidate | 0 of 10 | 10 of 10 |

**Descriptive summary**

The interviews conducted for this project provide an opportunity to understand the motivations that drive candidate behavior, however, these data are not intended to be analyzed statistically. As such, I do not attempt to do so here. Rather, I have used these data to present a descriptive summary of how candidate strategies are driven by the electoral environment under which they are operating. Collectively, these data point to two broad conclusions. First, there is strong support for all three expectations. Candidates in Washington described how running in a same-party contest incentivized them to target the median voter, to engage in active voter outreach, and facilitated relationships with interest groups and party factions from beyond their typical party base. More broadly, interviews reveal that top-two primaries create a fundamentally different campaign environment for candidates, as evidenced by the across-the-board differences on a broad range of behaviors. These data are presented in summary form in Table 10.

**Conclusions**

For most candidates interviewed in Washington, their election outcomes were not marginal. In fact, the closest contest was decided by a margin of 11 percentage points. Most were landslides, ranging from 20 to 50 points. Many of the contests had margins no closer than if they had been between one Democrat and one Republican. But while the election

results point to many candidates in one-party contests being comfortably safe, the interviews strongly suggest that the top-two primary, nonetheless, does achieve many of its intended goals. Reformers in California and Washington hoped that candidates would try to appeal to all voters, not just their respective party bases. Further, they hoped that one-party contests in lopsided districts would produce meaningful choice and competitiveness rather than having an outcome decided by default (Pildes 2011). In-depth interviews with candidates running in Washington's one-party contests suggest that the reform has been successful on these counts.

What reformers achieved is a system that encourages candidates to run as if they are in the fight of their lives, caused by the uncertainty inherent with running against a same-party opponent. Candidates behaved as though the outcome was going to be decided by the slimmest of margins, demonstrating responsiveness to a broader constituency, engaging in face-to-face campaigning, and developing working relationships with groups beyond their traditional coalitions. In these ways, reformers were clearly successful at creating an electoral institution that discourages the complacency and polarization that characterizes most legislative contests today.

Evidence from interviews further suggests that the uncertainty invoked by same-party contests encourages candidates to act in ways that political scientists might not have expected. Looking again to Rosenstone and Hansen (1993), those authors find that candidates employ voter contact methods strategically and efficiently—namely, when contests are expected to be close. However, evidence from my interviews suggest that candidates are over-compensating when facing a same-party opponent in a general election, given that none of their contests were decided by fewer than 11 percentage points and most were decided by far more. Thus, uncertainty seems to encourage candidates to allocate their time and resources quite inefficiently. This finding offers a tangential complement to Broockman and Skovron (2018), who find that legislators misperceive reality as it relates to the preferences of their constituents. While responding to uncertainty with such inefficiency is not optimal for candidates' finite resources, it offers normatively desirable implications for representative democracy. Policy responsiveness and accessibility to constituents collectively improve the ability for elected officials to provide accurate representation of the mass public.

Ultimately, these findings suggest that the top-two primary reshapes the meaning of "safe" districts. Conventionally, lopsided districts afford candidates electoral security if they can placate the extreme primary voters of their respective districts. In this way, candidates in North Carolina running in districts that favor one party overwhelmingly see that their role is to represent a narrow constituency of base voters. When the vast majority of districts are lopsided, this leaves a substantial percentage of voters without meaningful representation. When Washington's lopsided districts produce one-party contests, candidates perceive their electoral constituency as a much broader coalition. In top-two primary states, even the most lopsided districts may now have strong competition and responsiveness to the district median.

## CHAPTER 5: GENERAL DISCUSSION

Were prognosticators right about the consequences of the top-two primary? Findings from the preceding chapters contribute to a growing literature about the reform, with which we may evaluate the degree to which advocates and critics of the top-two primary were correct in their respective predictions.

First, critics of the top-two primary contend that the system denies voters a choice when both candidates are from the same party in the general election. This dissertation offers evidence to the contrary. Legislative contests with traditional primary rules may offer voters a choice between two different parties, but they only do so approximately two-thirds of the time. The partisan balance in many districts is so lopsided that it discourages challengers from running altogether. Furthermore, when candidates of both parties do appear on the ballot, they often offer voters a symbolic choice rather than a substantive choice. When only 30% of legislative contests nationwide are within a margin of fewer than 20 percentage points, most contests are decided long before Election Day. Such a system does little to offer voters meaningful choice. Findings in chapter 2 support the notion that one-party contests contribute to a more competitive electoral environment through the increased effectiveness of challenger campaign spending. In such contests, which nearly always occur in lopsided districts, challengers are able to earn more than twice as many votes per dollar spent when compared with challengers in two-party contests. The ability for challengers to get "more bang for their buck" is important for helping them to overcome the steep resource advantages enjoyed by legislative incumbents, who are re-elected at the same rate as members of Congress.

Second, advocates of the top-two primary argued that the reform would improve representation of the mass public. Findings from this dissertation offer much evidence in support of this claim. In chapter 3, an analysis of the content from candidate campaign websites shows that rhetoric used by candidates running in one-party contests varies systematically from the rhetoric used by those in two-party contests. Candidates in one-party

races employ several strategies to broaden the range of voters to which they appeal. Evidence from interviews conducted in chapter 4 build upon these findings to reveal the motivations and strategies behind efforts made to broaden candidates' electoral constituencies. In short, candidates demonstrate greater sensitivity to the median voters of their district, while those running in two-party contests uniformly acknowledge that they perceive that their role is to serve as a champion for their extreme party base. Those who call for improved responsiveness by elected officials may be heartened by these findings.

Third, advocates argued that the reform would ease the symptoms of polarization by creating an electoral environment in which moderate candidates are more likely to survive the primary process. The evidence for this assertion is mixed. While other scholars find that voters are largely unable to discern which legislative candidate is more moderate (Ahler et al. 2015), I find that candidates in one-party contests self-moderate in several meaningful ways. Interviews revealed that this tendency is driven by electoral uncertainty, whereby candidates in one-party contests take neither their elections nor their voters for granted. In contrast, candidates in two-party contests spoke at length about how the fact that their contest had virtually no uncertainty meant that they had no incentive to actively campaign for their voters' support. As one candidate in a two-party contest aptly stated, "that's bad for democracy."

It remains to be seen whether the uncertainty produced by same-party contests–and the competitive candidate behaviors that stem from that uncertainty–are a temporary effect, or whether candidates in top-two primaries will adapt to better gauge voter behavior in the future. There are several reasons to expect, however, that the uncertainty invoked by a same-party opponent will be long-lasting. First, to see an "adaptation effect" would suggest that only the same subset of candidates would face same-party challengers in cycle after cycle. This prospect seems particularly unlikely in California due to the eventual turnover imposed by term limits. Furthermore, the fact that such strong evidence persists nearly a full decade after Washington implemented the top-two primary suggests that the effects for candidate behavior discussed herein will be resilient. Finally, it is well-established that candidates are risk-averse actors with a propensity to "run scared" at even the slightest hint of vulnerability (King 1997). Given these combined factors, there is reason to expect that uncertainty will be a

lasting feature of same-party contests under the top-two primary.

Those who favor term limits may view this dissertation as reason to support adoption of the top-two primary in their respective states. Despite reformers' intentions to the contrary, research at the state level provides evidence that term-limited legislators actually become less – not more – concerned with the priorities of their constituents (Carey et al. 2006). Furthermore, the vast majority of congressional districts are drawn to overwhelmingly favor one party, a feature that suppresses the emergence of quality, viable challengers, thereby reducing incentive for responsiveness. However, the top-two primary may be an alternative pathway through which reformers might invoke responsiveness, competition, and turnover in congressional elections, especially in the absence of competitive districts. It is in safe districts where we are most likely to see one-party general election contests occur, and as the preceding chapters find, challengers in such races can be more electorally competitive in the presence of resource imbalances. Ultimately, from a practical standpoint, it is more plausible that the top-two primary may be enacted than national term limits, while primary reform may also come closer to achieving the goals of those who advocate for term limits.

While it is clear that the top-two primary offers normatively desirable benefits for representative democracy, it is worth acknowledging the consequences that some may consider undesirable. First, if candidates from the majority party split the vote too many ways in the primary, this may produce a runoff without any candidates from the party that received the most votes. In 2016, two Republicans and three Democrats ran in the primary for Washington State Treasurer. The two Republicans placed first and second by earning a combined 48.42 percent of the vote. The three Democrats earned a combined 51.57 percent, but were all shut out of the general election. Some may view such circumstances as an example where the top-two primary inhibits representation of the mass public, contrary to reformers' goals. Future work should investigate the larger impact of coordination problems caused by candidate entry decisions. Relatedly, there is much evidence that when the top-two primary produces one-party contests, voters from the party with no candidates on the ballot are substantially likely to abstain from voting in that contest altogether (Fisk 2017; Nagler 2015). Future work should evaluate how this affects the constituent-legislator connection.

## APPENDIX 2.A: CORRELATION MATRIX

*Table 11:* Matrix of bivariate correlations for variables in analysis

| | Chall. Spend | Inc. Spend | 1-Party Contest | Prev. Margin | District Ideology | Chall. Dem | Quality Chall. | 2008 | 2010 | 2012 | 2014 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ch. Spend | 1 | | | | | | | | | | |
| Inc. Spend | 0.17 | 1 | | | | | | | | | |
| 1-Party | -0.04 | -0.04 | 1 | | | | | | | | |
| Prev. Margin | 0.3 | 0.28 | -0.18 | 1 | | | | | | | |
| Dist. Ideol. | 0.22 | 0 | 0.42 | 0.17 | 1 | | | | | | |
| Ch = Dem | 0.02 | -0.04 | 0.05 | 0.08 | 0.58 | 1 | | | | | |
| Quality Ch. | 0.26 | 0.11 | 0.07 | 0.09 | 0.12 | 0.06 | 1 | | | | |
| 2008 | 0.07 | -0.23 | -0.05 | -0.09 | 0.08 | 0.01 | -0.04 | 1 | | | |
| 2010 | 0.14 | -0.17 | 0 | -0.02 | 0.04 | -0.16 | 0.04 | -0.17 | 1 | | |
| 2012 | -0.07 | 0.08 | 0.02 | 0.02 | -0.02 | 0.04 | 0 | -0.22 | -0.21 | 1 | |
| 2014 | -0.13 | 0.15 | 0.01 | 0.04 | -0.08 | 0 | -0.04 | -0.24 | -0.23 | -0.3 | 1 |

## APPENDIX 2.B: OUTPUT FROM ADDITIONAL MODELS

*Table 12:* Effects for challenger vote share, supplemental models

| | Original specification | Multi-collinearity check | Independent expenditures included | Districts where 1-party and 2-party contests both occur at least once | Pre-reform | U.S. House contests 2012-2016 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |
| (Intercept) | 24.98* | 21.37* | 24.93* | 28.86* | 38.66* | 6.53 |
| | (4.04) | (3.78) | (3.71) | (11.95) | (4.12) | (11.97) |
| One-Party Contest (1 = Yes) | −23.15* | −5.31* | −22.35* | −25.16 | | −39.77 |
| | (7.49) | (1.63) | (6.86) | (13.30) | | (49.85) |
| Log Challenger Spending | 0.41* | 0.39* | 0.42* | 0.74* | 0.48* | 0.58* |
| | (0.06) | (0.06) | (0.07) | (0.17) | (0.10) | (0.13) |
| Log Ch. Spending x 1-Party Contest | 0.48* | 0.53* | 0.40* | 0.48 | | 0.04 |
| | (0.16) | (0.16) | (0.16) | (0.26) | | (0.36) |
| Log Incumbent Spending | 0.84* | 1.15* | 0.82* | 0.36 | −0.75* | 1.26 |
| | (0.36) | (0.33) | (0.32) | (1.08) | (0.36) | (0.84) |
| Log Inc. Spending x 1-Party Contest | 1.55* | | 1.52* | 1.95 | | 3.22 |
| | (0.63) | | (0.58) | (1.18) | | (3.75) |
| Incumbent Previous Win Margin | 0.13* | 0.13* | 0.13* | 0.08* | 0.13* | 0.25* |
| | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.04) | (0.03) | (0.06) |
| District Ideology | 19.65* | 19.50* | 19.44* | 17.75* | 18.76* | 18.59* |
| | (1.10) | (1.10) | (1.10) | (3.15) | (1.95) | (2.32) |
| District Ideology x 1-Party Contest | −21.58* | −20.35* | −21.33* | −26.64* | | −33.13* |
| | (2.60) | (2.56) | (2.58) | (4.65) | | (5.89) |
| Challenger Party (1 = Democrat) | −4.90* | −4.78* | −4.96* | −3.71* | 2.43* | −0.50 |
| | (0.62) | (0.62) | (0.62) | (1.46) | (0.98) | (1.04) |
| Quality Challenger (1 = Yes) | 1.98* | 1.94* | 1.89* | 0.41 | 1.74 | 2.26 |
| | (0.68) | (0.68) | (0.68) | (1.42) | (1.79) | (1.54) |
| California | −1.83* | −2.09* | −1.98* | 0.91 | | −0.04 |
| | (0.78) | (0.77) | (0.74) | (2.35) | | (1.16) |
| 2008 | −0.57 | −0.60 | −0.36 | −1.26 | | |
| | (0.79) | (0.80) | (0.79) | (1.65) | | |
| 2010 | 1.19 | 1.25 | 1.26 | −1.16 | 1.79 | |
| | (0.83) | (0.83) | (0.82) | (1.86) | (1.13) | |
| 2012 | 1.61* | 1.57* | 1.71* | 0.16 | | 0.60 |
| | (0.67) | (0.68) | (0.67) | (1.66) | | (1.08) |
| 2014 | 0.42 | 0.36 | 0.59 | −1.09 | | 1.25 |
| | (0.65) | (0.66) | (0.65) | (1.72) | | (1.03) |
| $N$ | 529 | 529 | 529 | 124 | 120 | 153 |
| $R^2$ | 0.67 | 0.66 | 0.67 | 0.66 | 0.78 | 0.74 |
| adj. $R^2$ | 0.66 | 0.66 | 0.66 | 0.61 | 0.77 | 0.71 |
| Resid. sd | 5.16 | 5.19 | 5.13 | 5.75 | 4.51 | 5.22 |

Standard errors in parentheses
* indicates significance at $p < 0.05$

## APPENDIX 2.C: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

*Table 13:* Descriptive statistics of additional covariates, by contest type

| **Variable** | **Min.** | **1Q** | **Med.** | **Mean** | **3Q** | **Max.** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| District Ideology (Higher = better for challenger) | | | | | | |
| 1-party contests | 0.34 | 0.11 | 0.18 | 0.30 | 0.53 | 0.93 |
| 2-party contests | -1.27 | -0.31 | -0.14 | -0.18 | 0.02 | 0.60 |
| Incumbent Previous Win (50 = most competitive) | | | | | | |
| 1-party contests | 0.00 | 12.50 | 33.20 | 26.82 | 41.77 | 49.70 |
| 2-party contests | 0.00 | 32.50 | 40.11 | 35.62 | 45.01 | a 49.95 |
| **Variable** | **1-party contests** | | | **2-party contests** | | |
| Upper Chamber | 13 of 50 contests (26%) | | | 91 of 479 contests (19%) | | |
| Quality Challenger | 11 of 50 contests (22%) | | | 65 of 479 contests (14%) | | |
| Challenger = Democrat | 24 of 50 contests (48%) | | | 187 of 479 contests (39%) | | |

*Table 14:* Descriptive statistics of contests in which groups made independent expenditures

| | **1-Party Contests** | **2-Party Contests** |
|---|---|---|
| **Total observations in dataset** | 50 | 479 |
| California only | 19 | 156 |
| Washington only | 31 | 323 |
| ‘ **Total observations with independent expenditures** | 22 | 278 |
| California only | 9 | 78 |
| Washington only | 13 | 200 |
| **Percent of observations with indep. expenditures** | 44% | 58% |
| California only | 47% | 50% |
| Washington only | 42% | 62% |

*Table 15:* Descriptive statistics of independent expenditure totals supporting challengers

| **Observations** | **Min.** | **1Q** | **Med.** | **Mean** | **3Q** | **Max.** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| California | | | | | | |
| 1-Party Contests | 0 | 0 | 35.2 | 690.8 | 902.1 | 2262.8 |
| 2-Party Contests | .002 | 3.8 | 26.7 | 403.0 | 195.5 | 5430.3 |
| Washington | | | | | | |
| 1-Party Contests | 0 | 0 | 0 | 36.6 | 1.8 | 391.4 |
| 2-Party Contests | 0 | 0 | 0.2 | 54.9 | 39.7 | 824.6 |

Only includes contests in which indep. expenditures were made for at least one candidate.
Expenditure totals are presented in thousands of dollars.

*Table 16:* Descriptive statistics of contests included in analysis of U.S. House elections

| **State** | **Year** | **1-Party*** | | **2-Party** | **Total** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| CA | 2012 | 5 | (13.2%) | 33 | 38 |
| CA | 2014 | 5 | (11.6%) | 38 | 43 |
| CA | 2016 | 5 | (10.6%) | 42 | 47 |
| WA | 2012 | 0 | (0%) | 7 | 7 |
| WA | 2014 | 0 | (0%) | 9 | 9 |
| WA | 2016 | 1 | (11.1%) | 8 | 9 |
| **Total** | | 16 | (11.7%) | 137 | 153 |

*Parentheses indicate % of total cases that are single-party contests

## APPENDIX 2.D: MATCHING ANALYSIS

*Fig. 1:* Distribution of propensity scores for matching analysis

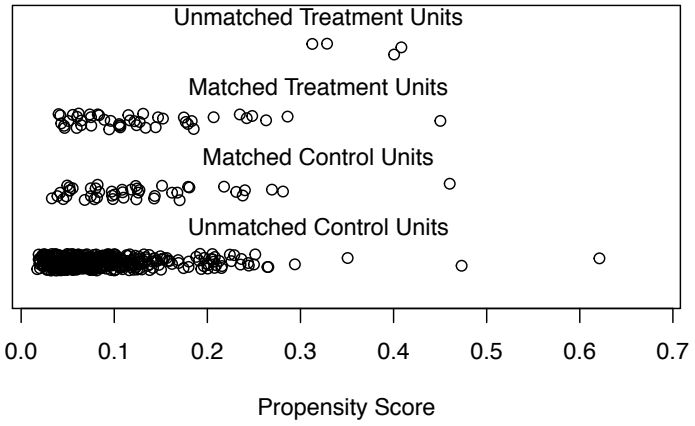



*Table 17:* Effect for challenger vote share, matched sample

| | Estimate |
|---|---|
| (Intercept) | $32.93^{*}$ |
| | $(1.51)$ |
| One-Party Contest | $5.40^{*}$ |
| | $(2.13)$ |
| $N$ | $92$ |
| $R^2$ | $0.07$ |
| adj. $R^2$ | $0.06$ |
| Resid. sd | $10.24$ |

Standard errors in parentheses

$^{*}$ indicates significance at $p < 0.05$

## APPENDIX 3.A: CODING SCHEME AND INSTRUCTIONS

**Instructions:** In this project, you will read candidate campaign websites for a study about political communication. The goal of this study is to understand how candidates present themselves to voters on their campaign websites. Your task is to read each webpage and identify the presence and frequency of certain language. The findings of this study will rely on the accuracy of the coding decisions that you make, so it is imperative that you read each and every webpage with care. Please adhere to the following general guidelines to ensure the integrity of the results:

- Always follow the coding schemes below to make your best judgements about content.
- Work in a quiet space with no digital distractions (including phones, computers, or TV).
- Work for no more than 2 consecutive hours at a time.
- Review these guidelines and coding criteria at the start of each work session and refer to them while working.

### Coding criteria:

#### 1. Mentions of candidates' party identity

How many times does the candidate mention his or her party?

- Check the top page banner, bottom page footer, all body text, and logos.
- References may include full party names (Democrat/Republican) and abbreviations that a typical viewer would be expected to infer as a party reference, such as a (D) or (R) next to the candidate's name. If the candidate is Republican, then 'GOP' counts as a party mention.

#### 2. Bipartisan statements

How many bipartisan statements does the candidate make? A bipartisan statement is one that fits within any of the following criteria:

- A statement that indicates the candidate's desire to transcend partisan politics.
- A statement that calls for compromise or cooperation between the two parties.
- A statement in which the candidate claims independence from his or her own party.

Examples of bipartisan words or statements include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Find bipartisan solutions
- Avoid partisan politics
- Take a middle-ground approach
- I pledge to work across the aisle
- Proud of my reputation for working with legislators of both parties
- I believe in progress over partisanship
- Partisan politics is hurting our state
- Proud of my independent voting record

### 3. Clear ideological statements

How many clear ideological statements does the candidate make? An ideological statement is any word, reference, or phrase that sends a clear signal about the candidate's values or ideology. Such statements might make a clear statement about the candidate's conservative or liberal ideology, but do not include statements about specific issue positions, which fall under section 6, below. Examples of clear ideological language include, but are not limited to, the following:

- For Republicans/Democrats to win back the majority, we must...
- I will be a consistent conservative/liberal/progressive voice
- Fight the tax-and-spend liberal agenda in Sacramento/Olympia
- I will defend our conservative family values

### 4. Endorsements

If the website lists endorsements, how many of those endorsments convey conservative or liberal signals? Use the following two lists below to determine in which category an endorsement belongs. If an endorsment does not fall into one the groups listed below, do not include it.

| **Conservative signal endorsements** | **Liberal signal endorsements** |
|---|---|
| Business associations | Labor unions |
| Gun rights advocacy groups | Gun control advocacy groups |
| Anti-abortion advocacy groups | Pro-choice advocacy groups |
| Law enforcement groups | Environmental advocacy groups |
| Anti-tax organizations | LGBTQ rights advocacy groups |
| Current/former Republican governors | Current/former Democratic governors |
| Current/former Republican U.S. Senators | Current/former Democratic U.S. Senators |
| Lower-level elected Republicans, if party is listed | Lower-level elected Democrats, if party is listed |
| State/local Republican party organizations | State/local Democratic party organizations |

### 5. Issue topics

How many 'Democratic' and 'Republican' issues does the candidate discuss?

- Certain policy topics are considered to be 'owned' by each party.
- Count the number of total issues that the candidate discusses the fall into the Republican column and the total number of issues that fall into the Democratic column, listed on the following page.

| **Republican issues** | **Democratic issues** |
|---|---|
| Government spending | Minimum wage |
| Taxes | Unions (friend of) |
| Business (friend of) | Affirmative action |
| Death penalty | Gun control |
| Religion/morality | Civil rights/liberties |
| Immigration | Education/schools |
| Terrorism | Health care |
| Creationism | Child care |
| Crime | Other child-related issues |
| Drugs/Narcotics | Social security |
| 2nd Amendment | Medicare/Medicaid |
| Veterans | Welfare |
| Farming (friend of) | Prescription drugs |
| Defense/military | Women's health |
| Pro-life | Environment |

**6. Issue positions**

For each Republican and Democratic-owned issue that the candidate discusses (as coded in the preceding section), what position does the candidate signal a position on that issue? Select one of the following choices for each issue:

- The candidate adopts a position congruent with his or her own party's position.
- The candidate adopts a vague or non-directional position.
- The candidate adopts a position congruent with the opposite party's position.

To identify whether the candidate adopts a position congruent with his or her own party or congruent with the opposite party, consult the state Democratic and Republican party platforms. Use California state party platforms for candidates running in California and Washington state party platforms for candidates running in Washington. Platforms are available for download at the following sites:

- California Democratic Party: https://www.cadem.org/our-california/platform
- California Republican Party: https://www.cagop.org/platform_and_bylaws
- Washington Democratic Party: https://www.wa-democrats.org/about/documents
- Washington Republican Party: https://wsrp.org/platform2016/

## APPENDIX 3.B: BARPLOTS OF PREDICTED OUTCOMES

The following plots compare the expected outcome of each dependent variable for candidates in one-party and two-party contests. All other variables are held constant at their respective means. Vertical bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. The caption for each figure indicates the dependent variable.

*Fig. 2:* Count of party ID mentions

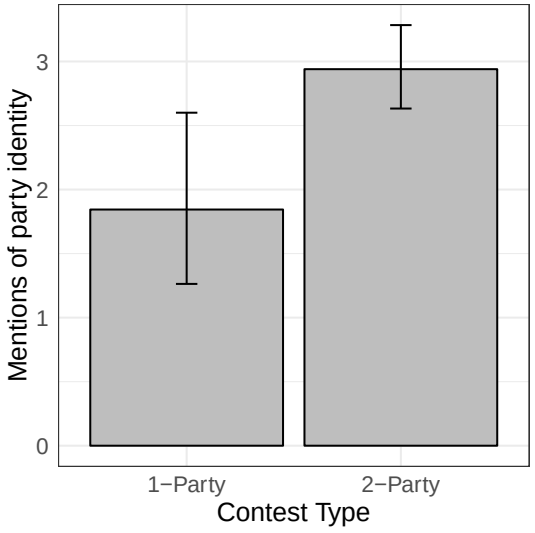



*Fig. 3:* Count of bipartisan statements

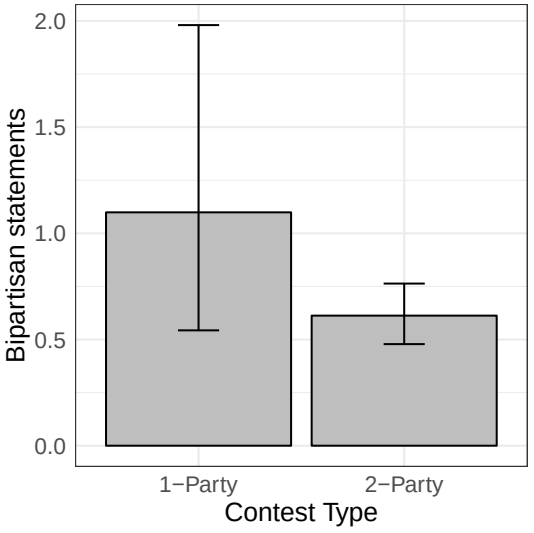



*Fig. 4:* Count of ideological statements

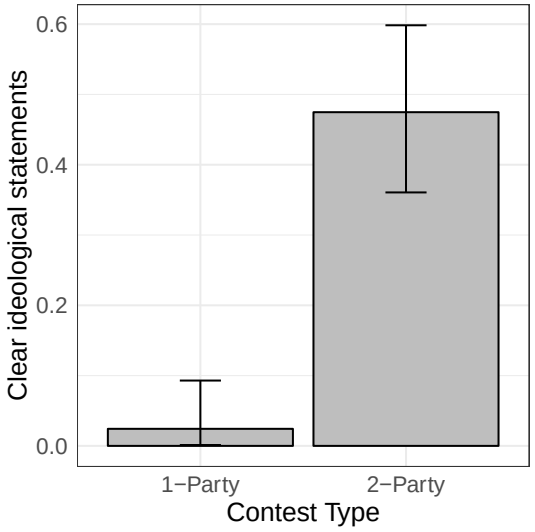



*Fig. 5:* Proportion of endorsements from groups that typically support opposite party

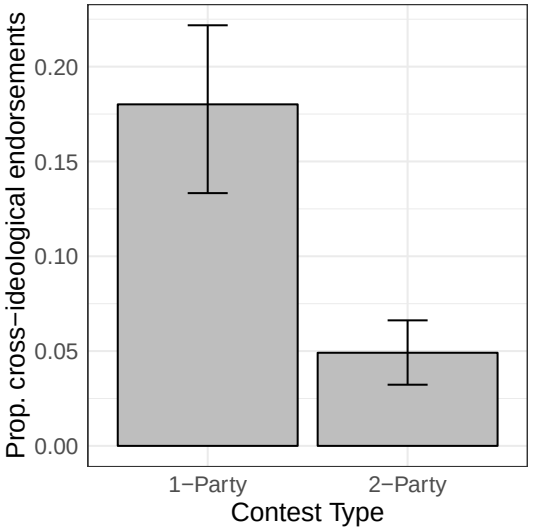


*Fig. 6:* Proportion of issues owned by opposite party

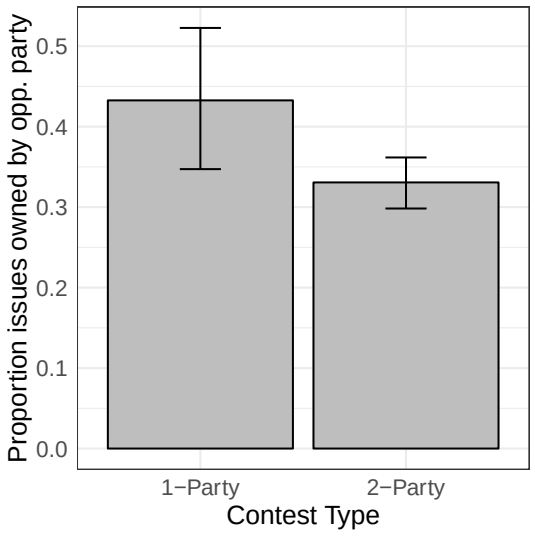



*Fig. 7:* Proportion of issues with vague or nondirectional positions.

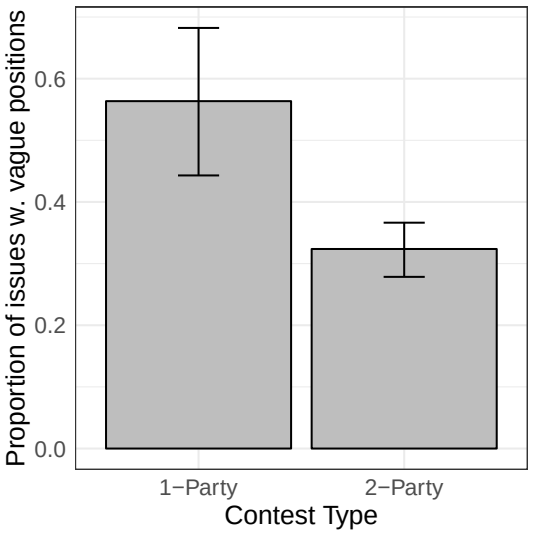
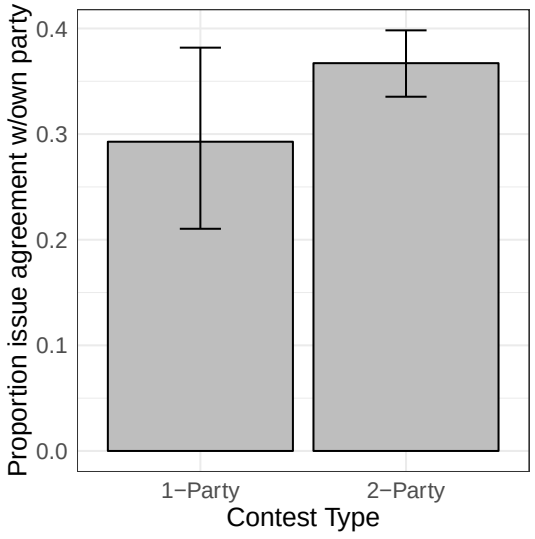



*Fig. 8:* Proportion of issue positions congruent with own party's position.



## APPENDIX 3.C: MATCHING ANALYSIS

*Fig. 9:* Distribution of propensity scores for mentions of party ID, bipartisan statements, and ideological statements as dependent variables

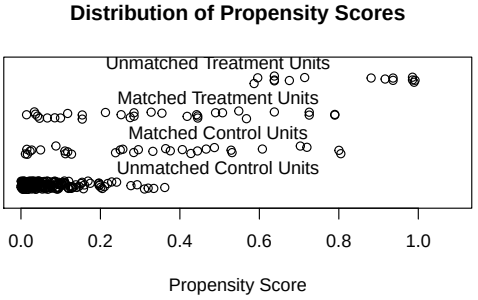



*Fig. 10:* Distribution of propensity scores for endorsements as the dependent variable

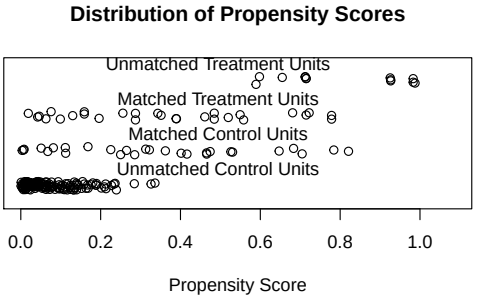



*Fig. 11:* Distribution of propensity scores for issues and positions as dependent variables

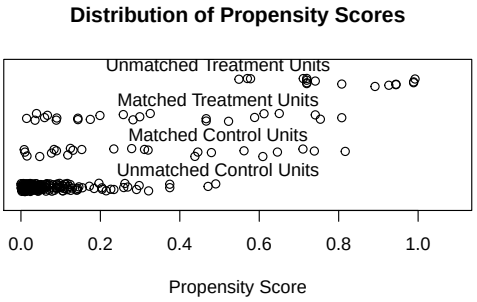



*Table 18:* Descriptive statistics of district variables in matched sample, by contest type

| **Variable** | **Min.** | **1Q** | **Med.** | **Mean** | **3Q** | **Max.** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| District Ideology (Lower = favorable for candidate) | | | | | | |
| 1-party contests | -0.80 | -0.48 | -0.31 | -0.31 | -0.11 | 0.00 |
| 2-party contests | -1.27 | -0.61 | -0.17 | -0.32 | -0.05 | 0.47 |
| Incumbent Previous Win (50 = most competitive) | | | | | | |
| 1-party contests | 0.00 | 30.60 | 33.50 | 32.45 | 43.20 | 49.50 |
| 2-party contests | 0.00 | 28.35 | 36.90 | 32.86 | 42.89 | 49.70 |

## APPENDIX 3.D: PREDICTED OUTCOMES, ONE-PARTY CONTESTS

The following plots compare the expected outcome of each dependent variable for incumbents and non-incumbents in one-party contests only. All other variables are held constant at their respective means. Vertical bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. The caption for each figure indicates the dependent variable.

*Fig. 12:* Count of party ID mentions

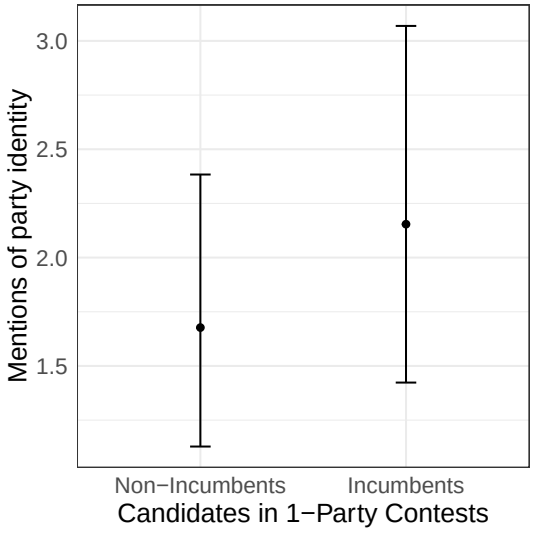



*Fig. 13:* Count of bipartisan statements

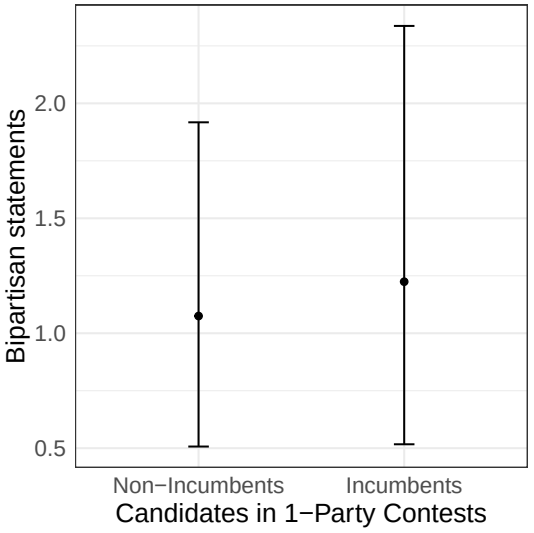



*Fig. 14:* Count of ideological statements

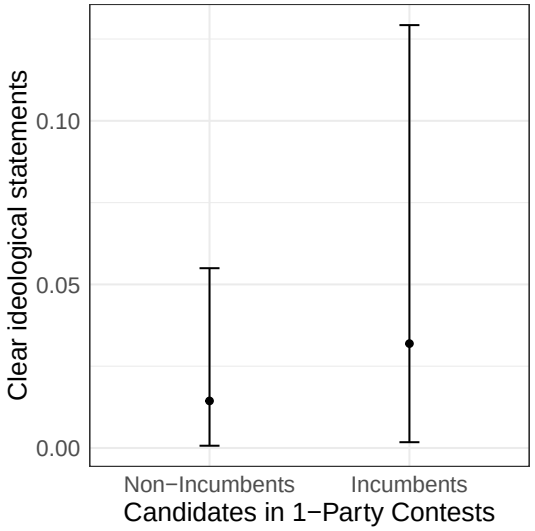



*Fig. 15:* Proportion of endorsements from groups that typically support opposite party

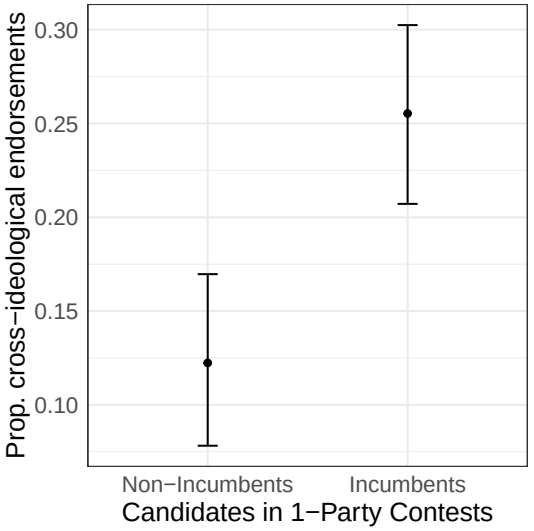


*Fig. 16:* Proportion of issues owned by opposite party

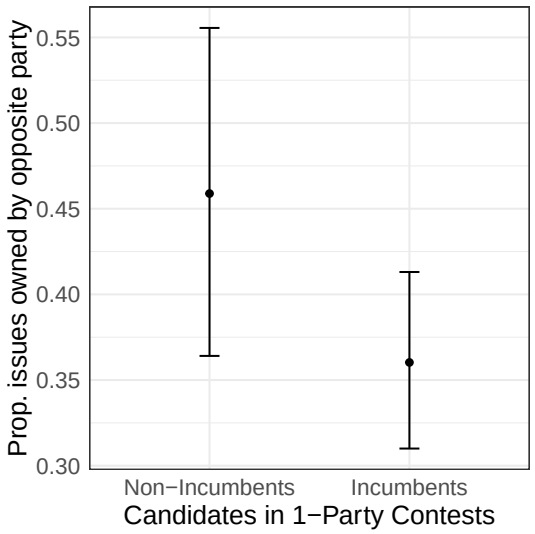



*Fig. 17:* Proportion of issues with vague or nondirectional positions.

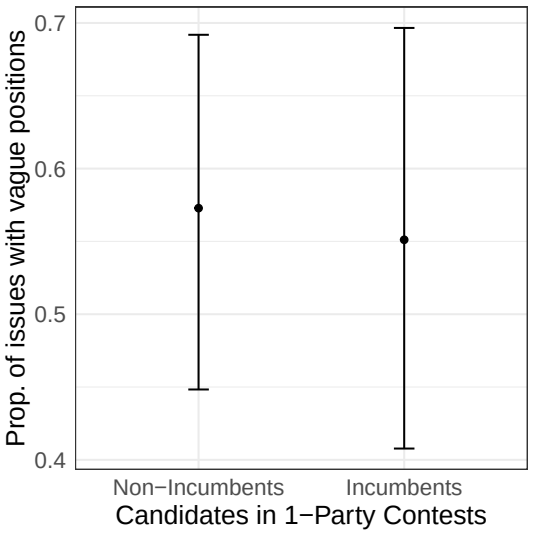
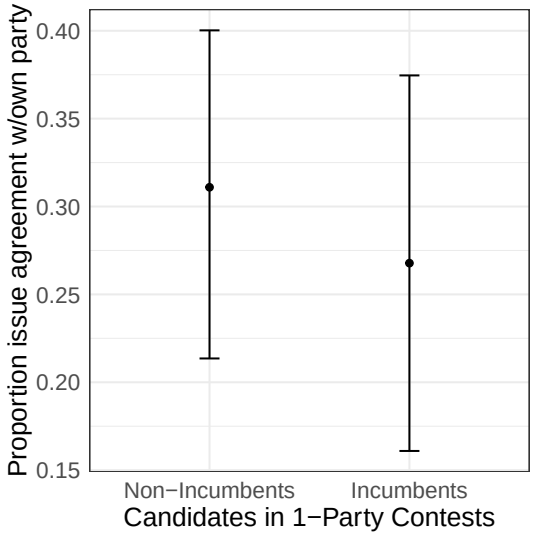



*Fig. 18:* Proportion of issue positions congruent with own party's position.



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